HER FRIEND LAURENCE.

A Novel.

BY

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HER FRIEND LAURENCE.

CHAPTER I.

A MORNING RIDE.

The next morning was so bright and beautiful that Violet felt sorely irritated by her inability to get away from her gloomy misanthropic fancies. She tried divers employments, from music to needlework; but piano and harp only seemed to give out mocking voices under her touch—voices cognisant of her folly and full of unpitying reproaches therefor. When she sat down to some complicated piece of lace-embroidery, which she kept on hand as a kind of penance, she could no more count the stitches correctly than if she had never studied an addition-table in her life, and discovered after a few minutes that she had

wrought such eccentric variations in her pattern that the gossamer web looked like a preposterous Chinese puzzle invented by some Celestial labouring under temporary aberration of mind.

She flung aside her needlework, ordered her horse, and was as impatient over the time it took to get into her habit as if she had been late in starting on some momentous journey.

A narrow, unfrequented street led directly from her house to the broad viale which encircles the city. She took this route, gained the suspension-bridge that crosses the river at the entrance of the Cascine, and galloped away down the road beyond the Porta Romana.

The March day might have strayed up from Sicily, it was so warm and bright, only with an exhilarating freshness in the air peculiar to the climate of Tuscany. The sky seemed a vast turquoise sea, with great shallops of white clouds moored here and there in its azure depths ; the atmosphere so clear that objects miles distant were distinctly visible. The groves of olive trees cast long grey shadows over the hill-sides ; the mountains in the background were crowned with wide

bands of amber light; the whole scene lovely and picturesque beyond description, only possessing a sense of peace and tranquillity in every sight and sound which fretted Violet from its contrast with her mood.

She reached the gates of the old Certosa: decided to dismount and go in. She liked to stray about the echoing corridors and neglected garden, tenanted by the dozen or more white-robed monks whom the march of progress has left as the sole remnant of the flock that once held possession, and this remnant only permitted to remain because the famous green and yellow liqueur manufactured within the walls gives a practical, commercial reason for the retention.

Violet waited till her groom rode up, slipped out of her saddle, and passed in at the gateway, to receive a cordial welcome from the old monk who met her at the door of the church; for she had often visited the place, and always left such substantial evidence of her coming that naturally the brethren waxed jubilant at sight of her.

And, wandering about in the garden, she came upon Gilbert Warner, his usually cheerful, animated face looking as if he had been tempted into a long ramble by fancies almost

as misanthropic and unfitting the day as those which had driven Miss Cameron out of doors.

It was a relief to see by his countenance, when she suddenly appeared, that he wished her anywhere else. To have met a person who showed satisfaction and tried for compliments over the unexpected pleasure of this encounter she felt would have exasperated her beyond endurance.

She greeted him with her customary cordiality, a little amused to think that she, the spoiled princess, could at any time or in any place stumble upon a specimen of male humanity who failed to beam with delight at her approach: 'I did not dream of finding any other visitor at this early hour,' she said; 'much less so industrious a person as you. Are you going to make a sketch of the garden and the old monk in the corner (who pretends to be absorbed in meditation, but is not), for a picture?'

'No,' Warner replied; 'I had an errand out here: besides, I wanted a long walk—a chance to think something over.'

'Ah, a subject for a new picture, of course!'

'Who would have expected you to be so matinal!' he said, without noticing her

remark. 'The last person I should have anticipated the pleasure——'

'Don't finish!' interrupted Violet, laughing. 'It is no pleasure to meet Miss Cameron, or anybody else! I am sure you came for the same reason that brought me—because you thought you would not see a human creature except the monks; and they are such movable wooden images they don't count.'

'I should not have supposed you ever had moods like those,' he said.

'I see no reason why I should be exempt from the chief of human privileges—that of being morose and out of sorts,' returned Violet. 'And can you find any good and sufficient cause why you should have any more right than I to such enjoyment?'

'I don't think I am morose,' he answered. 'I was tired—I have that excuse—I have been hard at work for a fortnight.'

'And I—oh, you need not laugh! Pray, what can be harder work than having to crowd every moment of one's waking hours with what is called amusement?'

'Yes, I can understand that. I only wonder why people do it.'

'So do the victims wonder, you may be sure.'

She was studying his face now. She had not seen him since the night he dined at her house. He did look tired ; not so much physically weary, as if some shadow had come between his blithe spirit and the sun. Violet heartily liked the young fellow, with his earnestness and his determination. It occurred to her that perhaps some of the evils so common to his estate—an artist in the outset of his career—had overtaken him. The expected instalment of his income might have failed to arrive in due season. He might find himself in a foreign country menaced by that most unendurable of petty ills—a lack of money. She would not do what she had meant to when they met—speak a few pleasant words and turn away ; she would make him talk—discover by some means if her suspicion were correct.

'Have you ever made a sketch of the garden ?' she asked.

'I began one the last time I was here, but did not finish it,' he replied.

'I wish you would,' she urged, seeing her way easily to be of assistance in case pecuniary difficulties stood in his path. 'I have always meant to get somebody to paint me a picture with my pet monk, Giuseppe, in the

foreground—leaning on the picturesque old well, for instance. Then I should like a companion sketch—say of—— Why, what are you shaking your head for?'

'I should, of course, be very much honoured by a commission from Miss Cameron,' he answered, 'but I fear it must wait.'

'Ah well, if you are too busy now, promise to undertake it as soon as you have time.'

'Or when I find myself in Florence again.'

'You are not thinking of going away? I thought you intended to remain several years in Italy.'

'Yes, I did. I told you I came out here this morning to think matters over.'

'About going, you mean?'

'Last night I believed my mind made up,' he said; 'but men are such silly creatures!'

'I am so sorry you think of leaving!'

'Oh, I shall come back some time! I have had an offer to go to Greece. I have never been, you know.'

'Naturally, the opportunity is not one to neglect,' she said, satisfied now that his trouble had a different source from that which she had supposed, but confident still that the trouble existed, and, with her usual desire to lighten care or distress, her heart softened

more and more towards the young man who looked so weary and sad-eyed, so unlike the happy, self-reliant youth she had hitherto known.

'If you do go, I hope you will not stay long,' she said; 'but perhaps, after all, you will decide to postpone your journey, since you were only thinking about it.'

'My decision must be made at once. If I go, I shall start to-night.'

'To-night?'

'Yes. I cannot put off my departure, because I am to meet some people at Brindisi for the next steamer, and I must first go up to Verona. I have business there.'

She stood thoughtfully regarding him.

'This is very sudden,' she said. 'When did you receive the proposal?'

'Yesterday,' she replied, his mouth working a little, as pronouncing the word reminded him of the circumstance under which the news had come. 'But—but—several times lately I have been thinking of going away: it would be better than to stay here and feel what an idiot——' He broke off abruptly, colouring scarlet to the roots of his hair. 'I have not the least idea what I meant to say,' he cried; 'or rather, why I said it in that silly

fashion! I mean I have an idle fit on me, and cannot work; change of scene may cure it.'

Violet laid her hand upon his arm as frankly as if he had been a younger brother.

'Come, walk up and down,' she said. 'Tell me all about it, Gilbert! My friends always tell me everything—I shall fancy that you are not really my friend unless you do.'

She spoke truly; even the most reticent people found themselves revealing their secrets to Violet Cameron with a candour at which they might afterwards wonder, though no person ever had reason to regret such frankness.

To go away had proved so difficult that though on the previous evening Warner, as he said, had believed his mind made up, he wanted still time to reflect. That speech of Mary's, which had carried such sudden desolation to his soul, presented itself in a new aspect as he turned it over and over during the long watches of the night. Was it so certain she had referred to herself—would she so openly have spoken? Or, reading his secret clearly, did her desire to save him further self-deception impel her to betray a truth in regard to her feelings whose utterance must

have cost her dearly indeed. He would talk frankly with Miss Cameron—if his suspicions were well founded (a little while before he had called them certainties), if Mary loved Laurence Aylmer, she would know it.

'What is at the bottom of this resolution?' Violet asked in her soft, confidence-impelling voice. 'You know it is not curiosity that impels me to ask, Gilbert. I am sure something troubles you.'

'Yes,' he said.

'Then tell me what it is,' she urged. 'Remember how often we women discover a way out that escapes you men.'

'You are very good—only too good!' he said.

'Hush! don't say that; it sounds like putting me off—a polite way of telling me I am meddlesome and intrusive.'

'You know I could not think that.'

'I shall believe you do unless you are frank! Come; I am a sort of grave elder sister; this is just the place for a confession. Don't make me afraid you have ceased to like me: you used to tell me everything; at least you said you did. Don't cast me off because you are not a boy any longer.'

'No, no!' he said, in a rather tremulous

voice. 'I—I had a mind to tell you the other night at Lady Harcourt's, only it seemed so silly.'

'Silly to have faith in a friend? oh, that is very wicked!'

'To trouble you with my nonsense, of course I mean.'

'Nothing that troubles a person I like can seem nonsense,' Violet answered. 'You know me well enough, I hope, to be certain of that.'

'Indeed I do!' he exclaimed, grasping her hand with such fervour that it hurt; his blue eyes fixed upon her in warm friendship and admiration, though they were still misty from the cloud which overshadowed his soul.

'Now let go my hand; what will the monks think if they see you! My old friend Giuseppe will withdraw the light of his countenance, certain that my visit was only an excuse to meet a young man,' said she, speaking playfully, just to keep him from an overstrained expression of feeling which he might afterwards regret. Her varied experience in playing confidante had taught her that if people only make their revelations with a certain degree of composure, they are not half so much disturbed in thinking the matter over

as they are if excitement has led them into a display of emotion, such as a man in his cooler moments terms 'making a fool of himself,' and a woman styles 'doing theatricals.'

They walked along the path for a little while in silence. A sudden light broke upon Violet—she knew what Warner's trouble was! How did it happen that she had been so blind as not to think of it before? Why, he had revealed his secret that first day they met in the gallery after his return; revealed it each time he glanced towards Mary. And she, Violet, had been so engrossed with watching the girl and Aylmer, that she had not even a thought for what poor Warner's face said, though in this rapid instant of recollection its expression recurred so vividly that she could feel an additional sting of shame at having been so full of herself and her miserable weaknesses that the truth, patent as it was, had escaped her. This boy had given his heart to Mary, and she had her heart too completely occupied with other dreams to heed the offering. Ah, just another of those dismally laughable catastrophes which Fate in her hardness likes bringing about! It was right that Mary should love Aylmer;

she was worthy his affection, and, rating him above all other men, Violet felt it fitting that he should have the first chance at the best and highest of Fortune's favours. Still it seemed cruel of Destiny to make this warm-hearted, affectionate, true-souled Warner suffer.

'What was it you had a mind to speak about the other night?' she asked. 'Tell me, Gilbert.'

'It was difficult to resist Violet Cameron when she looked and spoke as she did now. Fortunately, in her case, Nature had not bestowed, as she so often does, that gift of fascination which impels men, even against their judgments and wills, to yield to the spell, upon a woman who employed her singular influence for evil instead of good.

'Tell me,' she repeated.

'I believe I meant to ask you something instead,' he said. 'Still it seems cowardly. I ought to go direct and ask her—but it is so difficult—for her sake, I mean. If—if—oh, yesterday I thought I had been answered—but the more I reflect the less sure I feel—and to go away without being certain—perhaps, when too late, find I had made a mistake—oh!— He broke off suddenly, then

exclaimed : ' What an idiot I am ! I have just been thinking aloud instead of uttering a single intelligible sentence.'

' I think I understand,' Violet said, in a low tone.

He stopped short in the path and confronted her : he was pale to his lips, but very quiet.

' You mean—that I am too late. I was not mistaken—I am too late,' he said slowly, dropping the words out one by one with painful distinctness.

Left to himself half an hour longer, his meditations would have resulted in his returning home, seeking Mary, and boldly asking her the real significance of that speech which seemed to him the more doubtful the longer he pondered upon it. The matter would have been so easily cleared up—the last cloud between the young pair banished ; and now Violet thrust herself in between them and the truth.

She must answer, she must tell him. Oh, every species of hard duty came upon her—but she must speak !

' I will not deceive you,' she said ; ' it could do no good. Oh, Gilbert, I must not even tell you how grieved I am———'

He checked her by a quick gesture.

'Yes, I know,' she said; 'it would only sound like mockery. My dear Gilbert—my poor boy!'

'Too late,' he replied. 'I was sure of it the first time I saw her with him—perfectly sure; but I tried to deceive myself—I was such a weak fool!'

How his words cut across Violet's heart—like the echo of her own personal reflections! She too had been certain that very day—she too for a little had tried to deceive herself—weak fool that she was!

'I don't see why that man should have everything in the world,' Gilbert exclaimed suddenly. 'Ah well! perhaps he deserves it all—yes, I believe he does. I won't be contemptible just because he has come across my path—only his shadow has taken away all my sunlight. Ah, my God, how I loved her!'

He turned abruptly away and hurried up and down the garden-path.

Violet stood looking sadly after him. His pain, though different from hers, found such a response in her heart, through her great sympathy for him, that it seemed fairly a part of her own burthen—a new bitterness forced upon her soul.

It would be useless — nay, wicked — to follow her first impulse to tell him that she might be mistaken—that he should persevere. Mary's face as she looked that night when they talked in the moonlight rose before her; Mary's quivering voice rang in her ear! She had made no mistake. Better this poor boy should know the truth now—every day of hope against hope, of attempted self-deception, would only increase his suffering. Ah, why could not the girl have given her heart to this young fellow, so good, so clever, so suited to her in every way? Then Violet grew ashamed when she caught herself thinking this, afraid that she thought it because such consummation would have left Aylmer free—and free or not, it was all the same to Violet! Mary had nothing to do with her decision; an impossible barrier loomed between her and him—her age—her age!

Presently, Warner came back to her side again.

'I told you I had not quite decided on my plans,' he said. 'My mind is made up now; I am going to Greece.'

'But not at once——'

'I start for Verona to-night,' he inter-

rupted. 'The sooner the better! So this is good-bye—I shall not see you again.'

'Gilbert!'

'Yes, I know—don't try to tell me—I know! You are very kind to care. God bless you—good-bye!'

He hurried from her and disappeared before she could speak again. Violet sat down and meditated gloomily enough for a time; then she too went her way, having contrived in her efforts to do right to commit as much mischief as the most evil-disposed person living could well have managed to crowd into one morning.

CHAPTER II.

TWO NOTES.

As Violet was dismounting from her horse, Madame Magnoletti's carriage entered the court.

'Have I really caught you!' exclaimed Nina, as they exchanged greetings at the foot of the staircase. 'I fully expected you would be out, but I had made up my mind to wait, even if you did not come home until dark. I should be pleased to know what you have been doing with yourself. I have not seen you since the night before last, and you promised to come to me yesterday.'

'I could not——'

'Now don't tell fibs for civility's sake! You did not want to come! You were in one of your unsociable moods, when you did not wish to see a human creature. I know you!'

'I am so glad you do; it saves me a world of trouble,' said Violet, teasingly.

'I should like to shake you!' exclaimed Nina, and could say no more, because they were within reach of Antonio's ears, as he stood bowing his respectful welcome on the threshold.

'You must either come into my dressing-room, else excuse me while I take off my habit,' Violet said.

'I'll go into your dressing-room. If I don't keep watch, you are quite capable of disappearing by some secret door,' grumbled Nina.

'Miss Bronson is out——'

'I hate Miss Bronson!'

'My pretty little cousin is at the studio—'

'She is not pretty, and I hate her too!'

'Else I would leave them to entertain you while I change my dress,' pursued Violet.

'If you did I'd do them both a mischief!' cried Nina.

They entered the chamber where Clarice was waiting. Nina flung herself into a low arm-chair, and sat silent. Violet imitated her example, glad to have the relief of even a few moments' taciturnity on the marchesa's part; for, fond of her as she was, she wished

that caprice had led the little woman anywhere else this morning.

'I wonder you did not keep Clarice all day!' Nina exclaimed, as the door closed behind the discreet waiting-maid.

'If you display too much ill-temper I can call her back. Pray what ails you, that you should turn so acid? You are like a bottle of small beer that has had the cork left out.'

'"Flat, stale, and unprofitable,"' quoted Nina, in English, and began to laugh. 'It is such an absurd world; everything goes wrong—so does everybody—you among the number.'

'Oh, my dear, I never posed as a model for correct conduct.'

'We have made a blunder, and it is more your fault than mine; so you must help me to remedy it,' cried Nina, irrelevantly.

'Sorry I should in any way have added to your faults, my child; they are numerous enough when you are left to yourself,' said Violet, mockingly.

'Horrid creature! What a pity it is unladylike to break things as the men do in a passion. If it were not, I'd tumble over that great cinque-cento vase just to punish you.'

'For what reason? Tell me my crime before you sacrifice my most deliciously ugly ornament. Only look at that delightful little baby in swaddling clothes reaching with precocious eagerness after that preposterous apple, and be softened—towards the vase at least.'

'It is improper for an unmarried woman to talk about babies,' said Nina. 'I have been in America, so I know that.'

'Especially when one's married female friends give them no occasion,' returned Violet.

'Oh, you malicious wretch! I suppose I might have a baby as well as another, if I saw fit.'

'Can't say, really! I am a practical woman, and never assert a thing as a fact until I have proofs before me.'

Then they both began to laugh, though Violet felt she would rather cry, and was very suspicious that Nina's mood had reached a pitch as unreasonable as her own.

'Don't laugh!' the visitor exclaimed; 'I am very unhappy. Everybody disappoints me—you first——'

'Leave me till the last. Get to something more purely personal, and which will offer a

better excuse for unhappiness. What has that tiresome Carlo been doing now to vex you?'

'Nothing—everything! My dear, I'm not such a fool as to care about his endless flirtations. They mean as little as mine do. Carlo loves me as much as he is capable of loving anybody—as much as I deserve! We are both true specimens of the half-made-up people of this blessed nineteenth century. Sometimes I indulge vague visions of being something better, and making him so — mere visions. I'm only fit for the life I lead, and I like it—I shan't deny that. But I am worried just now — I tell you we have blundered.'

'Now, see here, Nina! I am not in a mood this morning to be found fault with; I should quarrel with my guardian-angel if he paid me a visit for that purpose. What do you mean by our blundering? Carlo has been losing, I suppose: if it is not your heart, it must be money—excuse my coarseness. But I cannot see how I am to blame. At least, you know if there is any difficulty in which I can aid *you*, I shall be ready, though I own frankly that if he had to suffer for his folly I should not pity him.'

'No, no! Things are not so bad as that yet,' returned Nina; 'though heaven only knows when they may be if we cannot foil her again. Of course Giulia da Rimini is at the bottom of my trouble!'

'Why, Carlo cares no more about her than I do for my slipper—you can't think it! Giulia might as well try to tempt him to eat a *ragout réchauffé* as bring him back to a flirtation grown cold. Now, don't be a goose, whatever you are, when you can be so sensible if you choose.'

'She knows that; so do I. She means to revenge herself on me—on us—she is sure you would be hurt, too, for my sake—by tempting him to play. I only found out yesterday what is going on. Gherardi betrayed it, in his blundering fashion, without meaning to. And she can do more harm than ever with the help of her Greek, whom she has forced down people's throats at the point of the bayonet. I cannot understand why Florentine society will submit to anything that woman chooses to do. It knows her thoroughly—says of her what she deserves—but she goes audaciously on, and rules all the same.'

'But about Carlo?'

'For some reason the Greek hates you; I have discovered that. I suppose you have snubbed him.'

'He has never been presented—never shall be!'

'And I am sure Giulia blames me for everything: your not visiting her, and all.'

'I'll tell her my reasons if you like.'

'Don't, in the name of all the saints! though, bless me, why one should invoke them I don't know, since they are always blind and deaf when one needs their aid.'

'Come, come, don't speak disrespectfully of them! They mayn't be much good, but we might be worse off without them! About Giulia?'

'Oh yes! Only fancy! yesterday, speaking of your supper last week, she said to me, with that dreadful smile of hers, "I see Miss Cameron has forgotten me this winter. I have a better memory for my friends. I don't forget her, any more than I could you, my darling little Nina." A threat for both of us. Wait! I know you don't care, but I do. She can't attract Carlo by her smiles, but she can by cards. Oh, they've organised a club! It meets two nights a week at her house—just the worst of the lot — and Carlo goes;

Gherardi told me so. And she and the Greek cheat—I'll stake my life on it!'

'That would do no good, unless you could prove it.'

'Prove it!' broke in Nina. 'How can I, when you will not help?'

'Oh, Nina,' said Violet, thoroughly exasperated by these incoherent attempts at an explanation which only rendered her meaning the more confused, 'if you can't talk intelligibly do let me alone.'

For the first time in all these years of warm friendship, the pair were on the brink of a quarrel—over nothing, too; for that very reason likely to be the more disastrous if it came. Without being aware of the fact, both were in a state of such intense nervous excitement, that for the moment a duel of words, which must leave wounds difficult to heal, would have been more in unison with their feelings than any rational attempt to come to a clear comprehension of matters.

Nina rose, gathered her wraps about her, and said: 'I will leave you alone; I'll never trouble you again either about any affairs of mine—you may be sure of that.'

Violet was in a mood so perverse that she might absolutely have let her go in silence

had she not caught sight in a mirror of the face Nina kept so resolutely turned away. The tears were streaming down the little woman's cheeks; her pretty mouth quivering like a hurt child's in her efforts to repress an audible sob.

Violet started up, hurried forward a few steps, and flung her arms round her friend's waist.

'I do think we are both out of our senses!' cried she; 'and I am more to blame than you. I don't know what ails me; I believe I am possessed, like those unfortunates in old days —not by one demon only, but at least a score. Sit down, you poor darling, and try to tell me. I'll do whatever you want; I promise that in advance.'

'It was all my fault,' returned Nina, soothed and penitent; 'I dare say I did not in the least explain.'

'Well, my dear, I must admit that your explanation failed in lucidity; still that was no excuse for my being so impatient. Come, commence all over again; I'll be patient enough this time, to atone for my rudeness.'

'Oh, rude you could not be!'

'And nothing could really interfere with our love for each other,' said Violet, kissing

her, and drawing her towards a sofa. 'Now sit down, and I'll sit by you.'

'How absurd that we should have come near a quarrel!' cried Nina, beginning, with her usual inconsequence, to laugh, while the tears still stood on her cheeks. 'The first time such a thing ever happened to us.'

'A warning! In friendship as in other things, *ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.*'

'Bah! I don't believe in proverbs; they wouldn't be repeated so often if they had any truth in them,' said Nina, her good-humour so fully restored that her spirits began to rise, and she could snatch hastily at more cheerful views of life.

'Don't stop to be either witty or misanthropic, else we may quarrel yet,' returned Violet. 'Let us get at an understanding!'

'I don't in the least know where I was—you put me out completely!' said Nina, with another baby *moue*, and a sudden disposition to have her cry out after all.

Violet felt that a fit of weeping on her friend's part would completely upset her resolve to be penitent and patient, so she hastened to fling Giulia da Rimini's name into the conversation, in the hope that it would move Nina to anger sufficient to check her

lachrymose tendencies—a weakness which it must be said the little woman seldom exhibited for the benefit of any looker-on, even Violet—never for Carlo's ; she was much too wise, even in her dreariest moments, to render any matrimonial crisis more desperate by such show of feminine feebleness.

'I don't remember what I was saying,' continued Nina.

'You were freely slandering the Rimini and her Athenian ; accusing them of being Greeks in the modern slang acceptation of the term,' replied Violet.

'And it is true!' exclaimed Nina. 'I have not the slightest reason to think so, but I *know* it is true.'

'And I am quite ready to put implicit faith in your intuitions,' said Violet, 'but what can I do?'

'Ah, just the thing you refuse—to let me go to her house the nights their odious club meet!'

'Now, Nina, with the best intentions on my part, that assertion is a little too strong for endurance! I never tried to hinder you or anybody else from visiting the woman. I don't go to see her, and I don't invite her, but ——'

'Ah, that's just it,' interrupted Nina, triumphantly; 'now we come to the gist of the matter at once! I tell you they cheat: I could watch if I were there—but she won't have me without you, and you won't go!'

'I can scarcely suppose that her insolence would carry her to that pitch—why, Carlo would never stand it.'

'Oh, Mary, Catherine, Barbara, and all the rest!' groaned Nina, giving herself a petulant shake. 'You don't half fathom Giulia yet, clever as you are! My dear, she did it so neatly—it was like a bit out of a play—and made Carlo side with her and be so stupid that he didn't even see her drift! Though I need not blame him, poor fellow, since he is only a man, when you, the brightest woman I ever knew, are just as blind!'

'More digressions!' said Violet, struggling hard to retain possession of her recently-recovered patience. But Nina's sudden gesture, as if imploring those lately-appealed-to saints to aid in bearing her friend's unparalleled obtuseness, restored Violet's determination, though the gesture might have failed in its effect had it not been accompanied by that previous threatening tremulousness about the

marchesa's pretty mouth. 'Now how did Giulia hinder you from seeing what goes on?'

'Easily enough! She said, "So sorry no women are admitted; that was the bargain those dreadful men insisted on! I cannot make an exception in your favour, because that would be insulting—would look as if I supposed you wanted to watch your husband!" Then Carlo burst out laughing, and ran off—(we had all met by accident at Lady Harcourt's.)'

'Well?'

Then Giulia said, "If our fascinating Miss Cameron had not given me the cold shoulder I could have broken my word and introduced her—she might have brought you without leave as her chaperon!" And she looked me full in the eyes with that awful smile. She knew she had settled *me*—she was certain that you would not set foot within her doors.'

'Was she!' cried Violet. 'My dear, even in the interests of your Carlo I can't turn my salons into gambling-rooms.'

'No; but if you would only go to see her.'

'She would rather I invited her to my house. Let me think—hadn't I promised

you and Lady Harcourt and Sabakine that you might come here to-night after the opera?'

'Certainly, and we mean to keep you to your word.'

'Good! And you think the duchess would like to come?'

'My dear, she knows as well as we, *ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte* in all things! She is afraid of you. If you set the example of cutting her, somebody may follow suit—then she is lost.'

'Heaven forbid that I should aid Fate and the duchess's instincts in the work they are sure to bring about,' said Violet. She sat down at her writing-table and indited a note which Nina read over her shoulder. 'Beautiful! Read it aloud—let us be sure it is perfect,' cried the marchesa.

'She has the audacity to doubt,' said Violet, laughing.

'Only listen—you have no idea how well it sounds,' returned Nina, and began reading the page aloud:

'"It seems an age since I have had the pleasure of receiving Madame da Rimini; yet last winter she was good enough to accord me that favour now and then, and I weakly

thought the force of habit might bring her occasionally this season also.

'"Better to know one's fate, however disappointing. Half-a-dozen friends have promised to come to me to-night after the opera—will the duchess be so hard-hearted as to make me admit that even in the case of a carefully-arranged *impromptu* gathering I am unable to afford them the happiness of meeting her?"'

'I should as soon have expected to be guillotined as live to write a billet like that to Giulia da Rimini!' Violet exclaimed, involuntarily trying to seize the epistle.

'Never repent a good action,' rejoined Nina, folding the sheet and putting it in an envelope. 'Now the address, and the thing is done. *Ce n'est que*—I spare you the rest.'

'Besides, I never did invite her, except to large parties.'

'She will be all the more flattered by your appearing to think she used to come when you were *en petit comitè*,' said Nina, holding fast to one corner of the letter while Violet wrote the superscription, snatching it away as soon as finished, and hastily ringing the bell, afraid that if given time to reflect, Miss Cameron might even yet refuse to appease the angry woman. The note safe in Antonio's

keeping, and gone beyond recall, the little lady fully recovered her spirits. 'You are a darling!' she cried. 'We shall have an answer presently. The creature is sure to be at home at this hour.'

'She will know it is your doing.'

'If she does, she won't allow herself to believe it—human vanity will prevent that. She will decide that you found you had made a mistake—discovered she was not a person to treat cavalierly.'

'At all events, it is done. Don't say another word about her. Let me forget for a little that she exists,' said Violet, feeling that she had been weak to allow even Nina's troubles to force her into an action so contrary to her sense of dignity and right.

For half an hour the marchesa talked incessantly in her brightest strain, and Violet made a decent pretence of listening, laughing, and replying, though all the while reflecting in a misanthropic fashion that friendship, like everything else in this hard old world, was a a plant which produced more thorns than roses.

At length Antonio's modest tap sounded on the door, and in her eagerness Nina forgot she was not in her own house, and cried out :

'Come in—do!' Then, 'Oh, Violet, I beg your pardon!'

'No need,' replied Miss Cameron; 'it is your errand—quite right you should conduct matters.'

The Swiss entered, bringing the expected missive on a salver, which he presented to his mistress.

'Give it to Madame la Marquise,' said Violet, unable to bring herself to touch the perfumed billet.

Antonio obeyed and retired, wondering a little at the oddities of the female sex. Why should his lady wish an epistle bearing her address handed over to another?

'Shall I read it?' Nina asked.

'I have a suspicion that if you do not it will remain unread,' Violet replied, laughing, but quite in earnest.

'Ugh, that odious perfume!' shivered Nina, breaking the seal. She unfolded the sheet, and began, '"My beautiful queen of flowers"'—stopped, glanced down the page, and cried out, 'Heavens, I believe she has the best of it!'

'Nina!' exclaimed Violet, in anger and dismay; 'read it—read!'

'Just listen! "Beautiful——"'

'Skip that,' interrupted Violet.

'Oh yes—"flowers!" Hear this! "So happy to learn that invitations to the Palazzo Amaldi are, like other blossoms of paradise, perennial. I knew its mistress was in as perfect bloom as ever, but I thought the charming informal reunions had failed to put out a second crop. I shall be delighted to renew our pleasant evenings. Unfortunately, I had invited to dinner a friend of my dear husband's, to whom the duke has begged me to show every attention; so I must trespass on your good-nature so far as to bring him, lest in my desire to accede to your kind wishes I should be guilty of a rudeness to Signor Dimetri."'

'No—I'll not endure that,' cried Violet; 'not even for you, Nina—I will not! That man shall never cross my threshold. I have avoided having him presented. I will not receive him!'

'He was there—he dictated it. I am sure he did. She never would have had the wit,' groaned Nina, underrating, as she had always done, the duchess's abilities.

'Then his wit fails,' said Violet. 'I shall

write and tell her it is one of my nights for not receiving strangers.'

'Oh, my dear!'

'Not a word—it is useless. Come, don't be afraid of the odious creature. We will defeat her yet.'

'Oh! but this will make her furious! Don't write yet. Let me think!' cried Nina, beginning to pace the room, as Violet seated herself determinedly at her desk.

"Think; but the fact remains! Giulia da Rimini shall not force that adventurer on me!' said Violet, firmly.

Nina made no answer. Her course had brought her near a window which commanded the court; she saw Laurence Aylmer entering.

'I have it!' she exclaimed. 'Leave it to me; she shall not bring the man; I can hinder her—only promise not to write!'

'I can't trust to any chance, Nina. There must be no loophole left—no doubt.'

'You shall have a letter from her in less than an hour, saying that she has decided it was better to send an apology to Signor Dimetri. Good-bye — I can't wait — only trust me. I will arrange this matter to your complete satisfaction—you'll wait?'

'Of course; but be very careful!'

'A whole flock of doves and an entire family of serpents combined,' returned Nina, and ran gaily out of the room.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNPLEASANT MISSION.

When the marchesa reached the staircase, as she had anticipated she saw Laurence Aylmer coming up.

'His unpardonable masculine recklessness shall be made of a little use,' thought Nina. 'I would not have believed he could be goose enough to risk offending Violet by dangling about that painted sepulchre, but since he has done it, and fascinated Giulia by his dreamy eyes and his poetical talk, I'll employ her weakness to aid in the plot against herself! Oh, will she never get to the end of her invention—never leave me any peace! Only let me save Carlo from her talons this time, and I believe I shall have done with her—it is only the play that attracts him. If I can make her admit me those nights, at least my presence will be a little restraint

even if I don't succeed in convincing him of her real motives.'

Aylmer interrupted her reflections by calling merrily :

'It is quite natural that angelic visitants should appear to one from above !'

'Equally so that demons should appear from below,' retorted she.

He hurried on to meet her, and they shook hands cordially.

'I had been wishing to see you,' said he.

'A pity that doing so did not rank among forbidden things, then you would not have restrained the wish so carefully, and I might have the pleasure of receiving an occasional visit ; as it is, I never set eyes on you unless I deliberately hunt you up in other people's houses.'

'I have been twice at your house without finding you. I believe you are never at home !'

'Didn't I say I had to go abroad ir search of you ?'

'Very likely, when you run away from a place just as I enter !'

'You can't enter here,' she replied, with her most ingenuous smile. 'Let me spare

you a useless mountain climb; Miss Cameron cannot and will not receive you.'

'The porter said she was at home,' rejoined he, his keen disappointment at her information so plainly visible in his face that Nina felt inclined to forgive him the sin of yielding a little to the duchess's spells.

'After all,' she thought, 'as Sabakine says, the poor fellow really cannot imitate Joseph beyond certain limits.'

'You merely want to tease me,' he continued. 'The porter would not make the mistake——'

'He could not help making mistakes, you mean, since he is a man,' she interrupted. 'Miss Cameron is ill—absent—dead! Don't be too wretched, however; she will return to life this evening, after the opera, and you are invited to join a few worthless people like yourself in her abode of all delights. Does that content you?'

'Perfectly, if——'

'I have warrant for saying so? I ought to punish your impertinent doubts by not allowing you to come.'

'Since I did not dream of expressing any. I only meant——'

'Something you ought not to mean, no

doubt. But be easy in your mind; I am to bring you. Don't fail to appear in my box before the end of the fourth act—nobody ever stops for the fifth—why did Groselli write it?'

'From that unfortunate masculine proneness to blunders upon which you are always so severe.'

'Very likely. But my wonder causes me to forget business. You have something to do.'

'It must be something pleasant, since the news comes from you.'

'More than pleasant. I am surprised you do not divine at once.'

'When you are so well acquainted with my hopeless stupidity? It would be useless for me to waste your time in guesses. Pray tell me what it is.'

'You are going with me to visit the Duchess da Rimini.'

'Oh!' he exclaimed—the little monosyllable expressing such a depth of weariness and annoyance that Nina rushed at the conviction that her fears for him had been unnecessary: he never would become Giulia's willing or passive victim.

'You are quite confounded by the thought

of so much happiness,' said she, with a laugh of genuine enjoyment; 'but try and merit the boon, for it is to be yours. Now, listen to me. You are to put on all your fascinations; have eyes solely for her. If any other men are there, I will attend to them.'

'And the aim of this——'

'Wait! You will ask the duchess if you are to have the bliss of meeting her to-night at Miss Cameron's.'

'A sure means of putting her in a frightful rage, because she will be obliged to answer no.'

'Which will delight her, because she can answer yes!'

'Why, I thought—I fancied——'

'No matter what; your part is to obey, not question. Now pay strict attention, and try to learn your lesson correctly. You will entrap her into admitting that she means to bring her Greek with her——'

'I really cannot be silent! Miss Cameron will not receive the fellow, of that I am certain.'

'Oh, second Solon, Daniel, or whatever! Now will you gratify me and—Violet?'

'Of course!' he exclaimed, with the prompt acquiescence which she had been confident

her unwarranted dragging Miss Cameron into her plot would occasion. 'I will do anything you require.'

'Then you will open your fullest batteries on the duchess; you will be tender and exigeant, impatient and romantic—rise to the heights of melodrama, if necessary—but you will declare your determination not to appear at the Palazzo Amaldi if Dimetri accompanies her adored, bewitching self.'

'As if such behaviour would have any effect.'

'You will make her promise not to bring him,' pursued Nina, regardless of his expostulation. 'That is the mission confided to you—to persuade the duchess voluntarily to withdraw her proposal of presenting him, and so avoid the necessity of a refusal on Miss Cameron's part.'

'But marchesa, marchesa!'

'One would think you were summoning "spirits from the vasty deep!"'

'I should need their aid to succeed in——'

'Don't trouble yourself to finish! You and I both know that you can manage the affair without the slightest assistance or difficulty.'

'Indeed, you sadly overrate my abilities, and I have no influence which could induce the lady——'

'Oh, don't waste precious time in fibs so utterly useless! Tell me at once if you mean to do what I—what we wish!'

It was difficult to refuse her request, yet he foresaw that to grant it would make another bond between himself and the duchess. He must pay the penalty of a demand which only intimate friendship could warrant, by conduct in accordance with the rules governing that relation. The lady would be able more freely than ever to unfold her woes and insist upon sympathy.

'I can only do my best; you must not blame me if I fail,' he said, in a rather annoyed tone.

'Don't put me out of temper by such affected modesty.'

'And the reasons seem——'

'I believe a man would stop to argue about reasons before trying to save our lives, if we were all shut up in a burning house!' cried Nina sharply, his hesitation rousing a feverish impatience in her mind.

Aylmer glanced at her, surprised by the tone of her voice; the signs of real trouble

which he read in her face checked any further efforts to avoid the unpleasant task set him.

'I will do whatever you wish,' he said. 'I only hope the duchess will——'

'Consent to anything you ask. Now take me downstairs, and talk of something else during our drive. Of course Giulia is a delightful subject for conversation, but mine is a frivolous mind, and it fatigues me to contemplate her virtues long at a time.'

She talked gaily upon any trivial matter that suggested itself, and Aylmer seconded her to the best of his ability, though his thoughts were sorely disturbed by the duty which awaited him. He wished that at least he might tell Nina exactly how his apparent intimacy with Madame da Rimini had come about, but that of course was impossible; not only should he appear a conceited fop, but it would be positively dishonourable to confess that the lady had elected him the confidant of her troubles, much against his own inclinations, which rebelled more and more as her exactions increased—and they did increase so rapidly. Why, only the day before he had been forced to go to her house, in answer to an appealing summons, and

she had detained him two mortal hours and prevented any possibility of his visiting Violet.

Could he have known the displeasure and vague doubts roused in Miss Cameron's mind by seeing him enter the duchess's doors, his annoyance would have been even greater than it was now.

Madame da Rimini received Nina with her customary warmth and exaggerated expressions of delight.

'My dearest, darling child! How good of you to come; I was thinking of you a little while ago—longing to see you.'

'It was a mutual longing, you perceive,' returned the Russian, allowing herself to be embraced with a composure and sweetness as perfect as if the very touch of her enemy's hand did not give her a thrill of disgust.

'Good-morning, Mr. Aylmer,' continued the duchess, turning towards him with that melancholy smile and air of repressed sorrow, which she often displayed for his benefit.

'I overtook this graceless wretch at the corner of the street; no doubt on his way here,' said Nina. 'I made him get into the carriage just to have an opportunity of utter-

ing desperate reproaches—he has not been near me in an age.'

Aylmer found it difficult to hide the irritation caused by Nina's superfluous fib.

'As I had done myself the honour of calling yesterday,' he said, 'I should owe an apology, did not the responsibility of this morning's appearance rest solely with Madame Magnoletti.'

'One's friends deserve thanks for frequent visits,' the duchess answered.

'But you cannot flatter his vanity, as you did mine, by declaring that you had been thinking of him,' said Nina.

'Oh yes, I may,' Giulia replied. 'I made Mr. Aylmer's acquaintance through you, so it is natural I should sometimes think of him when I do of you; and you know, I am sure, how often that is.'

'Then I owe to you a double debt of gratitude,' said Aylmer; 'even to give me a thought would be more than amiable, but to connect me in your mind with a friend whom you value so much as the marchesa is the height of kindness.'

'I cannot help being enthusiastic over the people I like—it is part of my impulsive nature,' sighed the duchess.

She fondled Nina's hand again, and gave Aylmer a tender glance, and Nina pressed the taper fingers which held hers and thought:

'Impulsive! Oh, you boa-constrictor! I must repeat that to Sabakine—how he will enjoy it.'

And Giulia was thinking:

'I have frightened you out of your little insolent ways, you small cat—forced your icicle of a Miss Cameron into civility too for your sake. Oh, I've not done with you yet—this is only the beginning.'

And Aylmer reflected in this fashion:

'I wonder which of us three ought to receive the palm for lying? But my masculine efforts look very poor beside theirs—how easily they do it.'

A couple of gentlemen were announced, and after a few moments of general conversation Nina took possession of the pair, and left Aylmer to entertain the hostess, saying presently:

'Giulia, I am going to break my heart by making sure that your orchids are finer than mine—Signor Landini vows they are. Please come with us, Signor Generale, and be umpire,' she added, addressing the elderly military man whose black and gold uniform gave him the

appearance of a gigantic wasp, though he looked too mild and amiable to sting under any provocation whatever.

The conservatory opened out of the drawing-room and was a very fine one; the marchesa prolonged her examination of the plants to give Aylmer full opportunity to enact his little comedy, keeping her cavaliers so well amused by her sprightly sallies that they had no leisure to be remorseful over their lengthened neglect of the lady they had come to visit.

The duchess afforded Aylmer an opening for what he wanted to say—or rather what he did not want to, and was half inclined to neglect, in spite of the appealing glance the marchesa had cast at him as she passed, and his desire to do anything that Violet asked.

'Shall I see you at Miss Cameron's to-night?' Giulia inquired.

'Madame Magnoletti was good enough to say she expected me to escort her there,' he answered.

'Then we shall meet. I did not mean to go out to-night—I have taken a violent cold, but *la belle Violette* wrote me such a pressing note that I could not refuse.'

How it vexed Aylmer to hear her speak of

his idol in that familiar fashion—perfectly unwarranted he knew. At the same time he was wondering how best he could plunge into the task confided to him; but the duchess continued:

'Besides, I have promised to present Signor Dimetri to her. This will be a favourable opportunity, since I need an escort as much as Nina.'

'Ah, what an unfortunate wretch I am not to be able to offer my services!' he exclaimed, having the grace to feel ashamed of the falsehood as he uttered it.

'I will own I should have liked it better,' she replied; 'though it is saying very little after all, since you know my sentiments towards that person.

'Then—excuse me—but I wonder at your afflicting yourself unnecessarily,' cried he. 'You need not take the man unless you choose.'

The duchess sighed deeply and shook her head.

'I am bound in the toils,' she whispered; 'I cannot offend him. I dare not. Oh, remember what hangs over me, and be merciful in your judgments!'

She thought Aylmer's impatient gesture

expressive of anger and distress at the painfulness of her position : it was only a means of relieving his annoyance at the deception circumstances forced him to practise.

'After all,' said he, 'I fear I shall not have the pleasure of seeing you to-night. I shall be best off at home, so I will stop there.'

His abrupt tone and words certainly betrayed pique : the idea gratified his listener.

'What has caused this sudden resolution ?' she asked with a smile.

'I think you must know. After what you have told me, do you suppose if—if I have any friendly feeling for you, I can bear to see that man in your society ?'

'Ah my friend—my good, generous friend,' she sighed.

'I have never asked a favour of you,' he hurried on ; 'you might grant me one so slight. Tell him it is impossible to keep your promise to-night ; that you had forgotten it is Thursday, and Miss Cameron only receives intimate friends—oh, any excuse, but don't let him go.'

'Have you really the matter so much at heart ?' demanded she, with a still softer smile.

'I swear I have !' he cried, growing ener-

getic from sheer delight at being able to say something literally true. 'Do promise—do! Ah, so little a thing as that you might accord!'

'Perhaps,' she said; 'at all events I will think about it.'

Her mind was already made up, but she wanted to hear him plead—see him grow more earnest and excited. In reality, she had not yet informed the Greek of what she had written to Miss Cameron, and she knew that she could not easily persuade him to go; but it would be such a crowning insolence in her triumph over this hated woman to force her to receive the man, that the duchess disliked to relinquish the satisfaction.

'If there is any doubt I must stay away,' said Aylmer. 'I can't meet him to-night—I really cannot! I—I think I will bid you good-day, duchess!'

'Why, what will the marchesa think?'

'It doesn't matter—that I am a bear. And so you refuse me! Well, well, of course, it was an impertinence on my part—pray forgive it. Be sure I will not offend again in the same way.'

'*Mauvaise tête*,' she said, but her eyes spoke a language which contradicted her playful words. 'And you really care?'

'Can you doubt it? You do not—you——'

'Hush, hush! here they come!' she murmured rapidly, as the voices of the other visitors sounded near the conservatory doors, and she felt furious at their inopportune return.

'Do I go or not?' Aylmer asked, relieved by the interruption. 'Ah, I thought it would be such a pleasant evening, but nothing ever happens that one wishes!'

'There shall for once,' the duchess said. 'Come to-night—I shall go alone. You will tell me then why it is you care so much to have me do so.'

The trio were in the room, and Aylmer spared the necessity of a reply. A slight movement of his head assured Nina that her scheme had succeeded.

The duchess exulted in the depths of her soul. Oh, she was beginning to wind in her carefully-arranged threads very rapidly now. She had forced Violet Cameron to invite her; she had turned Aylmer's head till his long-preserved pretence of composure had yielded; she should triumph in every way.

Violet still sat at her desk when Antonio appeared with a second letter. She opened it and glanced at the commencement:

'I have deferred giving my husband's friend the pleasure of coming to your house until another night. I had forgotten that Thursday evening was always reserved for your intimates, but Mr. Aylmer reminded me of the fact when he came in to call a short time since.'

Violet read no further. She flung the note aside, and left the room: the odious perfume which the woman always employed made the air suffocating.

CHAPTER IV.

GONE!

Violet and Miss Bronson went to the opera that evening. Violet fully determined to increase the number of her already invited guests from among the crowd of male visitors certain to invade her *loge*, and the female acquaintances who would be in their boxes, glad of an opportunity to go anywhere, at any hour of day or night, on the most frivolous pretext for amusement. Giulia da Rimini should distinctly perceive she had been mistaken in supposing herself included in the charmed circle of Miss Cameron's 'intimates.'

'It seems a petty thing to do; since I have asked her I might as well let the matter alone—but then this wretched sort of existence makes one "petty,"' thought Violet. 'I declare this shall be my last season in

what people stupidly call the "world." I am sure any place outside it would hold more attractions. So Mr. Aylmer had the kindness to remind the duchess this was not a night to present a stranger. I think Mr. Aylmer took a liberty in knowing anything about my private wishes. It is not very long since he gave me the impression that he did not visit the lady: I wonder if any man can tell the truth? Sometimes I half fear he is not so honest and straightforward as I believed him. Fickle he certainly is, else his fancy would not have wandered away from Mary as soon as she was out of sight—wandered away to an elderly thing like me! Ah well, it went back quickly enough, and the little girl loves him. After all, he is better than most men; at least, too noble to trifle with her happiness, and he must know now that it depends on him. My poor Gilbert! it seems such a pity—good, generous heart! Heigho, what a goose I am! One of them had to be disappointed, since Mary could not well like both. Only to think of this shy little puss having so many chances, when girls who live in society and rush wildly about from season to season in search of a *parti*, can't find even one adorer!'

In the meantime, the object of her reflections sat alone in her room, busy with a new novel, and deeply enough engrossed therein to forget reality in the companionship of the characters conjured up by the romancer's skill.

Somebody knocked at the door. Mary's faculties were so absorbed that though the sound vaguely reached her ear, it did not rouse any sense of necessity for answering. A second tap followed, sufficiently loud to bring her back from dreamland in great haste, and she called :

'Come in!'

But as soon as she had spoken, she recollected that it was useless to do so in English, indulged in a little wonder how people who did not by nature think in that tongue could ever contrive to think at all, and then repeated her permission in the soft southern accents she was acquiring with the facility of her age.

But when the door opened, Mary perceived that still another language must be brought into exercise for the benefit of that special member of the polyglot household who appeared—no less a personage than Mademoiselle Clarice, and naturally she, in her

character of Parisian, scorned to speak or understand anything save French.

'Pardon! I regret to disturb mademoiselle.'

'Not in the least, Clarice. What is it?'

'A little packet, which came just after dinner for mademoiselle, and was forgotten by that very careless Assunta,' returned Clarice. 'I was afraid mademoiselle might already be preparing for bed—I know she goes very early sometimes when she is tired—so I would not permit any one else to intrude.'

'Thanks; you are very good,' said Mary, still rather absent.

'It is mademoiselle who is good—the true cousin of my lady,' responded Clarice, with her stateliest curtsey. 'I lay the packet on the table — see! only some sketches, I think.'

'Some photographs I bought to-day,' replied Mary.

Clarice again demanded pardon for the interruption, and went her way. Mary sat holding the book, but the spell was broken. After a little, she rose and took up the package. It struck her that it did not resemble her purchase in size or shape, and

she began to examine the address, thinking the shop-people might have committed some blunder. As she caught sight of the firm, clear writing, she gave a start and a little cry of pleased surprise.

The parcel was so carefully sealed and the paper so thick, that opening it proved a work of some seconds. While Mary's eager fingers tore at the envelope, her smile growing sweeter and her eyes softer, her rapid reflections ran in this wise:

'From Gil — from Mr. Warner. The Vaughtons call him Gilbert so often before me that I forget. I can't imagine what he has sent me! He hasn't been in the studio since we nearly quarrelled yesterday. All my fault, I dare say. I am so bad tempered. He went away vexed. Oh! I thought he did not care, but if so, he wouldn't take the trouble to send. Ah, who knows?—perhaps this may be to tell the whole. Violet said no girl need feel ashamed of a liking for an honest man. I am not ashamed. I am proud of being able to appreciate him!'

As she reached this point in her meditations she succeeded in pulling off the wrapper. Two or three notes and a withered flower fell upon the table—in her hand she held a couple

of crayon sketches and a letter. A moment's hesitation, in which a terrible fear shot across her soul as abruptly as a storm rushes over a tropical sky, then she unfolded the sheet and stared at the opening line :

'Dear Miss Danvers,

'The suddenness of my departure——'

This first clause turned her so dizzy that she sank back in her chair ; her eyes fastened on the phrase and refused to go further. Presently she heard herself repeating in a bewildered tone :

'"The suddenness of my departure——."'

The sound of her own voice nerved her as if some stranger watching had made his presence known, thereby reminding her of the necessity for composure. She began the page again :

'The suddenness of my departure prevents my having the honour of making my adieux in person. I leave Florence in an hour. When this reaches you, I shall have started on my journey.

'These little mementoes I return. I could not destroy them ; yet, under the changed circumstances of your life, they ought either

to be destroyed or placed in your own hands, unimportant though they may be, save from the value I attached to them. That they are of value to me, is only a reason the more why I should not guard them longer.

'They are all here—only three notes and a withered rose.'

'I am going away. Long before we meet again, you——'

But here a pen had been dashed heavily across the page, blotting out the line. This was what followed:

'However extended the period of my absence may prove—however far my wanderings may lead me—I beg you to believe (if you care to accept the assurance) that sincerest wishes for your happiness will go with me, and the belief that such is your portion will always cast a ray of sunlight across my life, however colourless and dull from the lack of personal joys and interests.

'I have finished the two drawings which you were good enough to prefer among the sketches I made during our pleasant voyage, and I beg you to accept them from

'Your friend,

'GILBERT WARNER.'

Gone! Mary read the letter twice before she could believe that she was reading aright. Gone with no other farewell than these brief cold lines! When her mind took in the truth, it brought a swift, overpowering sense of shame. The hypothetical case she had proposed to Violet became a personal question: Was it not disgraceful for a girl to give her heart unasked? And she had done this: he had never cared for her—never; she had deceived herself from first to last! Even the dictates of ordinary friendship would have prevented a departure so cruelly abrupt—without so much as taking the trouble to traverse the corridor which led to her studio, where, during the whole of that long day, each time she heard a sound, her heart had leaped up with an eager hope that it was his step—the moment of reconciliation over their foolish quarrel arrived at length—each time the disappointment bringing a sharper pang and dread.

It seemed to Mary this dreadful feeling of humiliation must kill her; she could not live beneath its crushing weight. After a while the relief of tears was granted; then followed a long hour of stormy meditation, at the close of which her lacerated pride struggled for some

means of defence against its burthen. Could she throw the whole blame upon her own vanity and weakness? A thousand incidents connected with the past months came up—each recollection a fresh torture, but offering a firmer conviction which at least possessed a gleam of comfort for her wounded self-respect.

He had helped her own heart to deceive her; no man could have given plainer assurances of interest—nay, affection—than he had done. If he had never cared for her, he was a trifler—that meanest of God's creatures, a male coquette—to grieve for whom would be degradation indeed! The very harshness of her thoughts brought a reaction in his favour—made her as eager to find excuses for him, as she had been to seek them in behalf of her own dignity. He vain, false, capable of playing at devotion, of trying to win a woman's heart to amuse an idle hour, and flinging the gift aside as carelessly as he might a broken ornament when his pleasure in the game ended?

No—a thousand times, no! If he were false, neither earth nor heaven held aught of truth in all their round. He was noble and good, a king among men. She flung the assertion at her soul with passionate defiance;

it seemed to her almost as if she were taking his part against some enemy who had basely slandered him.

She caught up the letter and read it anew, slowly, weighing each sentence, each word. She would be calm ; she would exercise her reason ; behave as she might if some suffering girl had come to her for counsel. What did that letter mean ? It was the farewell of a man who went away because he deemed himself unappreciated, uncared for. That was what it meant : she should feel and say it, had the epistle been addressed to another ; she would say it now.

She studied the page again and again ; pored over the blotted lines with eyes so eager that they seemed to acquire a kind of microscopic power, which gradually made out a word here and there till at last the entire sentence became legible. What did it read ? At first she hardly dared to credit the evidence of her own sight, but each new examination rendered the phrases and their significance clearer, more decisive, waking joy and thankfulness in her soul.

She whispered the sentence to herself; she gained courage to repeat it aloud :

'You will have become so serenely content

in your new happiness that my heart will not even dare to beat too quickly in your presence.'

What did that mean? Why, he loved her—he loved her—and had believed her heart given to another. The joy of this assurance was succeeded by fears as terrible in their way as her humiliation had been. He had gone, and she could send no warning of his error after him. Years might elapse ere they met, and she must sit passive, helpless, amid the long night of separation; her hands bound; her will fettered. She was a woman, and could not speak; a woman, and so must let her heart and his moan on in the dark, and leave unuttered the single word which would end their pain—be the wand-touch of the fairy that should break the spell of the cruel magician Fate.

The thought was insupportable. Who could tell how long before destiny would permit him to come again within her reach? He might die and never learn the truth. Oh, she would think no more; she should certainly lose her senses under the horror of those possibilities. She started up; she must get away from herself; she could endure solitude no longer. There were to be guests at the house that

night; Violet had told her so. She would for once break her rule of seclusion, and beg her cousin's permission to join the party. Oh, no matter what anybody thought! The need of human companionship, distraction for her mind, was so strong that it completely conquered the overstrained ideas of decorum and propriety wherewith she hedged in her girlish impulsiveness at ordinary seasons.

She ran into her bedroom, carefully bathed her eyes, rearranged her hair, stood before the glass, studying to give her features an expression of composure, with an earnestness which would have been ludicrous, except for the motive that influenced her—the necessity of guarding her trouble even from Violet's lovingly watchful regard. Presently a knock sounded on the door of her boudoir; she had known that her cousin would come to say good-night before going to receive her guests. She hurried back into the adjoining chamber, and saw Violet standing on the threshold. What comparison would serve for her loveliness? Well as Mary knew the face, its beauty struck her so forcibly that, even amid her preoccupation, she began to search for similitudes.

'Ah, mouse, I felt sure you would be up

still! Naughty mouse, do you know it is almost midnight?' called Violet, gaily.

'And yet here comes the sunrise—that is it!' exclaimed Mary, moving forward with wide-open eyes of admiration.

'She is daft, this mouse,' returned Violet; pushed her laughingly back, and entered. 'What sort of ridiculous dream did I rouse you out of that you begin talking in Eastern metaphors?'

'I meant you; I was trying for a comparison,' said Mary. 'Oh, good gracious! do you know how beautiful you are?'

Violet gave her an odd glance, went up to a mirror, and regarded her own reflection for a few seconds in silence.

I have tried vainly to give you an idea of the woman's beauty, to make you feel it; so any attempt to describe her as she looked to-night, with her ordinary loveliness heightened tenfold, is worse than useless.

Violet had suffered agonies during the entire evening from that struggle which now seemed so familiar, so old, between her troublesome heart and her relentless will, and the poor tired heart had cried out bitterly against the cruelty of its tyrant.

Her box had been crowded; never perhaps

in the whole course of those ten years had men in every look and word rendered her power over them so evident. And among the troop of admirers Aylmer came, and Violet said to herself: 'I could make the dream of those brief weeks a reality; I could make him love me.'

'Make'! oh that word! it brought back a realisation of what would inevitably happen if she stooped to such baseness. These graces which were so potent must fade, oh so soon! and then? No; let her at least preserve her feminine dignity. And Mary, Mary! Ah, there stood his destiny; this pure, gentle-eyed maiden, with the promise of beauty in her face. An honest woman might have the right to sacrifice herself, but she must not allow the man she loved to throw away his future; nay, must prove that she was a woman, not a fiend, by preventing her factitious charms from casting a single shadow across the happiness of this girl who had a whole life before her—a whole life—while she, Violet, was at the end of hers, since at the end of her youth.

On reaching home she had hurried to Mary's room, to strengthen her resolve by the sight of that sweet countenance—the sound of that

loving voice—for a score of devils seemed trying to rouse her hatred against the child who had unwittingly helped to render her humiliation complete.

Mary stood at the other end of the chamber and watched her, wondering why all precious gifts should have been lavished upon this one woman; then in her turn felt hopelessly wicked because she could for an instant grudge aught to this radiant creature, whose noble qualities of mind and heart exceeded even her beauty.

She suddenly recollected the open letter. Ah, if she had left it where it lay, allowed Violet to see it, to question, discover the truth, how different might have been the result of later events! But it was not to be.

'Have your belongings got the thousandth part of a fraction out of place, Miss Prim?' Violet asked, as she turned away from the mirror.

'I'll burn them all if they don't keep in order!' cried Mary, burying the note under a mausoleum of heavy books.

'It is time for me to go,' sighed Violet; 'the people must have begun to arrive. I wish they would not be foolish enough to

accept one's foolish invitations. I want to stop here. It is a comfort to have a glimpse of such an image of peace—Hypatia in early girlhood; Lady Jane Grey at her studies; whatever grave sweet heroine you like best. You see I can manage compliments as well as yourself. Anyway, you are a darling, and I love you.'

'I am nothing of the sort!' exclaimed Mary. 'I'm a nasty discontented silly thing—but oh, do love me all the same!'

'Useless, I suppose, to beg you to go downstairs?'

'I was about to ask you if I might.'

'Ask me if you might! Don't be an exasperating mouse! Haven't I exhausted my powers of rhetoric, time and again, in trying to persuade you not to stay shut up here? I would not, of course, urge you to go out; but it is nonsense to hide yourself when we have guests. People will begin to think I keep you a prisoner from jealousy of your pretty face.'

'Oh, that is highly probable!'

'Anything monstrous is always probable in this ridiculous old town. But come into the *salon* to-night, just for once.'

'My dress——'

'Won't answer, my little recluse. Put on that white gown you scolded me for sending home the other day. Quick! no need to call Clarice; I'll help you. If I leave you to reflect, you'll not follow. I know your tricks and ways, you artful pigeon, you!'

'But you will be late——'

'Suppose I am? The women won't notice my absence, and the men will be the more pleased to see me because they have been kept waiting.'

'Miss Bronson would scold you well for instilling such sentiments into my youthful mind,' cried Mary.

'Heavens, yes! she would declare that my conscience had become ossified, my heart petrified, my better feelings acidulated, my modesty carbonised, and my soul—oh, that she gave up long ago, and could not find a new anathema to heap upon it! But hurry, hurry—we are wasting precious time!'

In a few minutes Mary had exchanged her sombre black attire for a gossamer robe of some Indian fabric, cunningly wrought with wreaths of white flowers; here and there a scarlet poppy, emblem of mourning, interspersed among the leaves.

'I want a ribbon for your hair; oh, here

is one. We'll leave it down your back. What a mass of waves! Oh, you pretty creature, just look at yourself. Would you recognise Miss Mouse?' cried Violet.

'All girls who will one day be beautiful have instants when a forecast of womanhood's perfection brightens them immaturely. Such a moment had come to Mary: she was positively lovely. Laurence Aylmer would see her. Violet remembered that—remembered it with a spasm of pain which did not hinder her feeling glad. Yes, glad! He would be more thoroughly convinced than ever, now, whither his heart and his happiness really pointed; no further possibility of doubt; no added hesitations to help her own silly heart to plead against the truth.

'Come,' she said, in a feverish haste which Mary was too excited to notice; 'come!'

'May I talk? may I be gay? You won't think it wrong?' the girl demanded, her cheeks like roses, her eyes sparkling with an unaccustomed brilliancy.

Violet stopped short, pushed her back, and stared at her.

'Good heavens, the child looks like me!' she fairly groaned; then laughed aloud.

'Envy, my dear. I was afraid of your making me seem old.'

'Old!' repeated Mary, and echoed her cousin's laugh in a tremulous way, with an expression in her face which made Violet think:

'She has been jealous. That was what ailed her. Oh, my poor child, don't be afraid! I'll not put my shadow between you and the light—between him and the future.'

Then aloud:

'Don't you let my dangerous foreigners take possession of you. I'd as soon permit some black insect to touch one of my white rosebuds. I shall tell Mr. Aylmer to take charge of you.'

And the hand she held quivered. Mary get thinking that all the promise of her girlhood could not give her what Violet had in her prime—the positive certainty of being loved.

'I wish Warner was here. He should make a sketch of you,' continued Violet, her vagrant fancy calling up the young man's countenance as she had that morning seen it—worn and weary with pain.

The opportunity Mary wanted.

'Oh, didn't you know?' she cried. 'He

has gone to Greece—set off so suddenly he had no time for farewell visits. He sent me two such lovely sketches as a good-bye present!'

And Violet thought:

'Sent his broken heart, and she could not even find a spare corner to hide the fragments!'

'It is too bad he has gone; but I suppose he has work to do,' continued Mary.

'Work enough!' said Violet. 'Well, come along. *Les absents ont toujours tort*—he must share the ordinary fate.'

And now they were at the salon-doors, and Eliza Bronson hurried forward, saying:

'There is no order in this house—none! Violet, crowds—troops of people are here, and what excuse could I make for you? Why, Mary Danvers, I thought you were in bed! Oh, very well! You both know what you mean, I suppose. For my own part, I do not in the least.'

And she stood aside with a resigned air to let them pass, suddenly remembering that in her desire to overwhelm the pair, she had terribly exaggerated the number of guests; but, after all, that was the fault, too, of those misguided creatures!

CHAPTER V.

CHRISTENED CIRCE.

At least a score of guests were gathered in the salons when Violet and her cousin entered—quite a throng it seemed to Mary, and so few persons known to her that she began to feel a little shy and almost wish she had remained in her own room, until the recollection of what reason she had for the first time to fear solitude brought back her courage.

Engrossed as the hostess was from the moment of her appearance, she did not forget to introduce several agreeable people to her charge, and established her under the wing of an elderly lady, certain that if confided to Miss Bronson's chaperonage, the spinster in her present mood would, with the best possible intentions, torment the girl nearly to death in a very brief space of time.

Madame Magnoletti came in, leaning on Laurence Aylmer's arm. That gentleman paid his respects to Violet, stood for a few instants among the little group which surrounded her, then hurried away to where Mary sat. Violet watched him go, and told herself it was well. The pretty child would have her happiness. This seeking her the instant his duty to his hostess permitted, showed very clearly his state of mind. At the same moment the Duchess da Rimini was announced, but Violet failed to observe that Aylmer hastened towards her cousin like a man in search of some haven of refuge as Giulia appeared, resplendent in a costume of amber satin and black, which set off her dark beauty to the greatest advantage.

'My dearest Violet,' she said, as Miss Cameron advanced to meet her, 'nobody except you could have persuaded me out to-night; but I could not refuse your entreaties.'

And Violet was in her own house—could neither resent the familiarity nor refute the possibility of having entreated Giulia da Rimini to grace her rooms! She had to endure the enthusiastic greetings, the utterance of her Christian name (hearing which for the first time from those lips made her

feel she would hate the sound of it henceforth), the pretence of an intimacy which had never existed; for Giulia was too astute to lose this opportunity of assuring all beholders that she and the courted heiress were as affectionately frank in their mutual attachment as two sisters could have been.

'O Mercury, god of craft!' Lady Harcourt whispered in Nina Magnoletti's ear. 'Giulia is tremendous! We have never appreciated that woman; she is more than a match for us all.'

'Don't insult the sex by giving her the title!' returned Nina. 'Some Frenchman said the wife Cain found in the land of Nod was a wild animal with a woman's face. My dear, Giulia is her lineal descendant.'

'Or the original article, who has escaped the Deluge, and has lived down to our days,' said her ladyship. 'But we need not be severe upon her; it is amusing to watch her manœuvres, since, as you said the other day, she cannot interfere with any of us.'

Could she not? Nina's own boast struck her like an evil omen. And there was Carlo now, greeting the creature in his indolent, graceful fashion, and Giulia holding him fast, while she kept her place beside Miss Cameron,

and continued those amical demonstrations which caused their recipient's blood to boil.

There had been signs this season in the social atmosphere which warned the duchess (keen as other savage creatures to scent danger) that her position was less secure than of old. She could no longer venture, in spite of her audacity, to despise the verdict of a person so important as Miss Cameron ; and Violet should give her the support she needed. She should, even if it were necessary to come to some open bargain, tell the American that Carlo and Nina should suffer if she did not consent. Still the duchess hoped to avoid this extreme measure, which, though it were to prove a temporary triumph, would be a burning of her vessels that Violet might turn to her disadvantage later, for Giulia's acuteness prevented her committing the blunder ordinary humanity makes of underrating an enemy's abilities. Too wise to push her victory beyond safe limits, the signora moved away before Miss Cameron's powers of endurance were entirely exhausted, but that they had been tried to the furthest point Nina's knowledge of her friend enabled her to see, well as that lady disguised her emotions.

'I know what you are thinking,' she whispered, going up to Violet and making a pretence of adjusting the ornaments in her hair. 'Oh, don't lose patience; you are behaving like an angel.'

'I confess that if I could have the satisfaction of boxing Carlo's ears it would be a great relief,' returned Miss Cameron, unable to resist laughing, exasperated as she was.

'You will have a little respite,' said Nina; 'he has to go to Perugia for a couple of days. I am going with him—we start in the morning. His agent is dead, and he must attend to matters on the estate.'

'Perhaps you can find some means of restoring his reason when you get him to yourself for awhile,' rejoined Violet.

'I—I hope so; I am not sure. Oh, I think I have a little secret,' Nina whispered. 'Don't ask me any questions yet.'

Violet was clasping one of her bracelets, and did not notice the vivid blush which accompanied the words.

'If you have,' said she, 'I really think you might have tried its efficacy instead of forcing me to endure that woman's unparalleled insolence to-night. Oh, Nina, I cannot do it again!'

'I couldn't—I'm not certain—I——'

Violet did look at her now as she uttered these broken ejaculations.

'What ails you?' she asked. 'You told me to-day you were humbled, and here you look as blooming and happy as if neither cards nor Giulia da Rimini even existed.'

'I'll tell you when we come back, if there is anything to tell. Oh, Violet, I should be the happiest woman alive!'

Miss Cameron gazed at her in wonder.

'Whatever can you mean?' she began, but Nina interrupted her.

'Hush! here comes Carlo. Oh, if everything else fails, you might turn his head if you would only take the trouble,' she said, beginning to laugh, just to hide the pleasurable agitation that reference to her new, blissful mystery had occasioned.

'What a charming proposal!' returned Violet.

'I don't care; he couldn't resist if you really tried. Oh, I do not exaggerate; that woman means to have revenge. Carlo has told me everything at last—he has lost fearfully since they got up that club. You will not desert me?'

'Of course I will not. Why Nina, there is

nothing I would not do for your sake; surely you know it!'

'Of course I do, bless you! Only—only—don't be hard on Carlo: he is so good—indeed he is.'

'I can forgive him a great deal while you say that, Nina; but indeed this growing insanity for gaming must be stopped.'

'Yes; we must find some means! Ah, Giulia has captured him again; she'll carry him off to the card-table.'

'But they both know that high play will not be tolerated in my house: I have so often openly declared that the person who tried it would not be invited a second time.'

'Oh, it is so easy to arrange that: each hundred francs in reality stands for thousands. Do watch him to-night. It seems to me that if we can only tide over these next few weeks we can save him. I have a dread of something terrible; it has haunted me for days. What a fool I am to get excited! Only call him away from her—do! Oh, tease him, coax him, flirt with him—anything, but don't let him suspect I have told you of his losses.'

Miss Cameron made a little sign with her fan to Carlo; he took advantage of some person's addressing the duchess to escape.

'He would as soon think of flirting with his sister,' continued Violet.

'Well, he would and he wouldn't. He admires you so immensely, that you could turn his head if you chose.'

'Nina, we should both regret it if we were to employ any unworthy means, even for the end we have in view.'

'As if any other would answer with men!' groaned the marchesa. 'Oh, if he should lose all that legacy, we must go and stop—heaven knows where—perhaps in Russia! I looked to that money to get us out of all difficulties. I did not think he would be mad enough to risk it. It was to have been invested weeks ago.'

'What are you two plotting?' asked Carlo, as he sauntered up to them.

'Nina has just been telling me you propose eloping with her,' said Violet. 'I think it very shabby of you.'

'It is rather *infra dig.* to run off with one's own wife,' returned he, smiling at that lady. 'But, upon my word, the small fairy looks so pretty to-night, I may think myself an enviable fellow.'

Nina's perfect serenity under the avowal of his losses had roused his gratitude, and disposed

him to be admiring and tender; and she was so bewitching with the bright blush still on her cheeks, and the half-startled expression still in her eyes, that he inwardly vowed no man ever possessed a treasure of equal worth.

'I cannot ruin my reputation by talking in public to my legal tyrant, even if he does soothe my vanity by such very complimentary fibs!' cried Nina, and went laughing away.

'She really is adorable,' said Carlo, looking after her.

'If only she belonged to somebody else! But be good enough not to irritate me by praising another woman—even her. I am in an exacting mood, and can allow nothing to interfere with your entire devotion to me,' said Violet, playfully.

'Ah, you want to make use of me for some purpose! Well, I am always at your service—only you might tell me the motive of such sudden amiability.'

'You rudest of creatures! Is this my reward for showing that your fascinations move me?'

'I am a huge goose, no doubt; but not a big enough one to believe that. Who is the man you want to punish?'

'Oh, you infidel!'

'Tell me, and I'll help in any way: make love to you if you like.'

'Thanks, you are too good.'

'Well, appear to do so, to any extent—only confess.'

'I confess nothing; but you are my captive for this evening.'

'The most willing one woman ever found,' said he.

But this style of badinage with a married man—the husband of her friend—this slight show of following Nina's counsels—was too distasteful to Violet; she could not continue it. Nothing but unpleasantness could come from any disturbing of the brotherly and sisterly terms on which they had always been, by any approach to coquetry on her part, even though Carlo perfectly understood that it was a pretence.

'There is no reason why I should not tell you my real motive,' she said more gravely. 'I do not like gaming in my house. I know if you refuse to play, the others will refrain too, in spite of the Duchess da Rimini, who is never happy without cards in her hand. Nina told me only a few days ago you had been very wise this winter, so you will not mind leaving

baccarat alone this evening to gratify me.'

'Of course I will,' Carlo replied, laughing consciously—a little ashamed to recollect what proofs of wisdom he had given, but relieved from a momentary fear that Nina had betrayed his folly to their friend. 'By-the-way, it is the first time this winter I have met the fascinating duchess here.'

'Oh, we never did more than exchange civilities at rare intervals,' Violet replied carelessly, afraid that he might suspect something in regard to her reason for inviting the woman. 'I do not like her, and she returns the compliment with interest.'

'She adores you, she says.'

'It is kind of her even to say it. Adore her and save me the trouble if you will, only don't let her make my rooms a gaming salon, please.'

'Oh, she is better employed,' said Carlo. 'I notice she rather avoids cards before Aylmer—he has a prejudice against women's gambling.'

The marchese was sorry as soon as he had uttered the heedless speech; although irritated with Laurence for his apparent intimacy with the duchess, he felt most

anxious to keep Miss Cameron from sharing his suspicions, and upbraided his own stupidity for speaking.

Violet followed the direction of his glance, and saw Aylmer standing beside Giulia da Rimini. She was talking eagerly, and he listening with every appearance of interest. The words in the duchess's note flashed across Violet's mind, and the displeasure, the sensation of doubt in regard to him which they had caused her, came back with redoubled force as she noted his deferential attitude.

She changed the conversation, and Carlo followed her lead, yet he felt certain that she was annoyed by the very apparent state of matters, and now he reviled Aylmer's stupidity more heavily than he had done his own.

But gallant as Aylmer's behaviour appeared to lookers-on, it proved far from satisfactory to the duchess. She had come hither exulting in the hopes which his words and conduct had roused, and to her astonishment he showed no disposition to follow up the advantage offered by her concession of the morning. This return to his old obduracy roused her to wrath so hot that she compre-

hended it would not be difficult for him to change her love to virulent hatred, although, paradoxical as it sounds, the consciousness only deepened the spell he had unwittingly cast over her fancy. She saw how difficult he found it to confine his attention to the recital of some fresh wrongs she had begun pouring into his ear ; saw how his eyes involuntarily wandered towards Violet Cameron, eloquent with a tenderness which shallow observers might deem the effect of her own presence. But the duchess was not to be deceived, and she set her teeth hard together behind the smile which softened her lips, mentally vow ing in some way to bring matters to a crisis before the evening ended.

'What a convenience friendship is!' she exclaimed—a little vent for her anger she must have. 'Oh, you need not try to look inquiringly ; you know what I mean! *La belle* Cameron may be intimate with Carlo to any extent—only another form of showing her affection for Nina!'

The duchess had never before spoken a slighting word against Violet in Aylmer's hearing. He was furious at her suggestion, yet in a mood to be troubled : only this very day some vague hint of the rumours so

artfully spread by Giulia and the Greek had reached his ears. Though he would not have insulted Miss Cameron by admitting it to his own thoughts, his loathing for this woman by his side gave him, when in her society, harsh opinions of her whole sex. Could Violet stoop even to the most distant appearance of a flirtation with a married man?

He stopped short in the question—shocked with himself—so angered against the duchess that he could not resist saying:

'I beg your pardon. I know you are jesting; but they are both old friends. One never can tell what harm an idle speech like that might do.'

The man lived who dared to read a lesson to her—Giulia! Her fingers positively quivered with eagerness to smite him full in the mouth with the fan they held. She could not speak for an instant; he stood silent, unable to regret his words. She had tormented him so much of late that he wished she might take sufficient offence at his audacity to end their acquaintance on the spot.

But the duchess restrained her rage, put up her fan to hide any tell-tale revelations in her face, and said:

'Thanks for reproving me. Ah, you are a real friend!'

'Pray do not suppose I could be guilty of the impertinence,' returned he, forced into offering excuses by the way she received his speech.

'It was a favour—intentional or not,' she said. 'It is not like me to say such things. I am nervous, irritable to-night. Ah, I suffer—try to pity instead of blaming me.'

'Certainly I should not take that liberty,' he exclaimed.

'It is a privilege of friendship,' she replied, in her softest tones, 'and you promised to be my friend. You do not regret that promise; you do not mean to recall it?'

What could he answer except to give such polite assurance as his unwilling lips were able to frame?

'Oh, I know you did not,' she continued. 'You are too good and kind to leave me utterly alone in the dark. How should I have lived during these past weeks but for your sympathy? My whole heart goes out in gratitude—oh, believe that; tell me you believe it!'

He felt the situation as absurd as it was unpleasant; but he could not escape—could

only try to turn the matter off with a jesting compliment.

'Gratitude for so little; oh, duchess, what a huge word to apply!'

'Do not laugh,' she said, 'do not seek to stifle your real feelings or mine under an attempt at persiflage. I cannot bear it to-night; I am too excited, too suffering.'

Their real feelings! great heavens, what did she mean? Nothing, of course; merely an exaggerated southern figure of speech.

'This room is oppressive, I can't breathe,' she added. 'Take me out in search of a little air. Let me have a moment to recover myself; talking of these fresh troubles has unnerved me.'

Nothing remained for him but to offer his arm, and lead her away. Lady Harcourt and her great ally Sabakine watched them go, as they had been for some moments watching their *tête-à-tête.*

When the pair disappeared, the Russian said: 'The spell works—works bravely. Surely you cannot deny it any longer.'

'*Mon cher*, I gave up denying anything when I ceased believing anything—ages ago,' her ladyship replied.

'It is so great a satisfaction to find myself

right,' he said, laughing out of the recklessness which was so strong an element in his character that the most solemn or the most tragic events of human life struck him from their ludicrous aspect, even when matters which really affected his feelings. 'I am as proud of having christened her Circe, as if my choice of the title had bestowed her sorceress's gifts upon her.'

'Oh, they might be very slight, and still serve to turn the men of this generation into swine. Giulia must work harder and stranger transformations than that to prove her right to the name,' retorted Lady Harcourt, more bitterly than she often spoke; or, to be correct, with an earnestness which she seldom put into her calmly cynical remarks upon humanity.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE SORCERESS'S TOILS.

THE duchess showed no inclination to cease her wanderings; they passed through several salons, and reached the great ball-room, which was not thrown open to-night. Here Aylmer had to obey the motion of her hand upon his arm; they traversed the corridor, and entered a suite of rooms scarcely likely to be used on the occasion of so small a party, though lights were burning therein.

In the second of these chambers the duchess sat down upon a sofa, and motioned Aylmer to place himself beside her.

'Now make me your explanation,' she said abruptly.

'My explanation?' he repeated.

'Yes; I had no time to ask for it this morning. Admit that I was very good-natured to grant your request without your

giving any real reason for one so extraordinary.'

'Did I give none?' he asked, wondering what possible motive he could assign, since of course he could not tell the facts.

'Those were not reasons,' she replied. 'You declared in the most rebellious fashion that you would not come if Signor Dimetri did; so I sacrificed the unfortunate fellow, who is dying to present his homage to the fascinating heiress. Come, was it jealousy where she was concerned which made you so determined I should not bring him?'

He must say something; he could not appear an ass; but oh, how he hated the woman at this juncture, and anathematised his own soft-heartedness for ever having felt a moment's sympathy with her troubles!

'You are very well aware that no man is likely to remember any other woman when in your society,' he said.

'Am I to believe that?' she asked in a low voice, in which a sudden tremulousness became perceptible.

There are positions which absolutely force a man to talk nonsense, else get up and run away—a virtuous proceeding which, it must be confessed, even the authority of patriarchal

example does not render easy, so Aylmer now could do no less than murmur :

'Can you doubt it?'

For once, too, his manner, which women found so charming, proved a downright misfortune. He really could not, with his pale face and mournful eyes, bend towards a lady to ask her if she would have a cup of tea, without unconsciously looking so that any bystander, not hearing his words, would have sworn he must be whispering a speech that went at least to the very verge of a declaration.

So now, though in his secret soul wishing the duchess in Jericho, his 'Can you doubt it?' was accompanied by a glance which, while he feared it would express his boredom, seemed only sad; and the duchess, believing that the time of her triumph had arrived, was not the woman to let it pass unemployed from any foolish feminine delicacy or shame.

'Yes,' she said, 'I do believe it; at least, you see, I am not offended.'

'Would to God you were!' thought Aylmer.

The duchess held out her hand. There was nothing possible on his part except to take it—to bow over the fingers, too—all the while

with a secret shiver of dread, a premonition that an ill-natured destiny would lead Violet Cameron within sight; and I fear that he cursed the Italian in his heart as his moustache brushed her hand, instead of his lips fastening on its whiteness with the feverish energy which would have been (at least, according to the lady's ideas) befitting the occasion.

But he did not speak, therefore she must.

'Aylmer,' she said, 'I thought we were friends.'

'I trust we are,' he replied.

'You would be more frank if you considered me your friend,' she said. 'You are reserved —mysterious!'

'Mysterious—I?'

A sudden perception of the absurd side of the predicament made him long to laugh again.

'Yes! You have some weight on your mind—some trouble. I have seen it for weeks.'

Her witch's eyes had penetrated his secret: she was going to speak of Violet. He could not bear that—he really could not. His reticence and delicacy went far beyond that of ordinary men, who seem ready to pour out their love-stories to the first comer with a frank-

ness as incompatible with deep feeling as it is with manly dignity. Except in the case of the professor, to whom he was bound by ties which rendered their relations like those of father and son rather than of common friendship, Aylmer had never bestowed a word of confidence upon the people with whom he was most intimate—Nina and Carlo; and they, displaying a tact which one could wish less rare, had refrained from any allusion to his secret, whether gravely or with the misplaced jests one's allies are apt to indulge under such circumstances.

'You will not speak—you will not trust me?' she asked, bending on him the softest lustre of her eyes, to whose very open revelations the hurry of his thoughts left him still utterly blind.

He could not let her go further; in his present irritated mood it would have seemed a positive profanation to allow her to take that dear name upon her lips.

'There are things of which a man cannot speak,' he said quickly, his voice tremulous with emotion.

The duchess caught the tremor, but naturally misinterpreted its cause.

He had forgotten wisdom and Miss

Cameron's wealth: brain and fancy were so dizzied by her spells that he could no longer restrain his feelings; it needed now but a word of encouragement from her, and he would pour out the tale of his passion and its struggles.

'There is nothing he need keep back from a real friend,' she answered, 'if that friend be a woman. Have I not said? Even though it be a secret which she knows ought not to reach her ears, her sympathy—her—her tenderness will prevent displeasure. Tell me your trouble, Aylmer.'

She positively would not comprehend even so plain a refusal as that which he had given. Then he would tell her outright that he had a secret, but it was too precious to name; she could only do him one favour—never to allude to it again.

'Silent?' she continued. 'Ah, but when a knight wears a lady's favour he must obey her behests! See—this compels obedience.'

She took a flower from her hair, and, with quivering fingers, adjusted it in the buttonhole of his coat; her other hand dropped upon his; her head bent so low that to any person standing near it would have seemed actually resting on his shoulder.

On the instant, before Aylmer had even leisure to take in the new thought which the woman's utter *abandon* roused in his mind, there was a sound at the end of the room behind a mass of plants, like the flutter of a covey of birds suddenly disturbed, and Mary Danvers appeared, white with an excitement made up of indignation and horror.

'I couldn't help seeing you!' she cried, her French sounding broken and difficult in her passion. 'I didn't hear what you said—oh, I am sure I didn't want to watch!—I—I——'

She broke down, gasping for breath, regarding Aylmer with eyes of fiery contempt. The duchess drew back the hand that lay on his, lifted her head, and hid her face behind her handkerchief in pretended trouble, but there was triumph in her heart: at least she had robbed her hated rival! If he had never told his love to Violet he could not explain this scene; if he had, she would not believe his attempts at exculpation. For the moment, in the savage joy of the thought, she forgot the risk of exposure she ran in case this girl and Miss Cameron did not guard her secret between them.

Aylmer sat quite still. He comprehended

what meaning this scene must have, even to those inexperienced eyes. He was positively stunned by the swift-rushing consciousness that every hope was over. The duchess had wrecked his life.

And Mary had got her breath back, and was exclaiming:

'It's—it's no good for me to make excuses. I didn't stop there to listen. I—I thought every moment you would leave the room; and—and, I didn't want you to know—to know——'

'Go away!' the duchess interrupted in a low tone to Aylmer. 'Let me speak to this foolish child. Go!'

He rose mechanically; but Mary cried out, transfixing him with another glance of wrath and horror, which came like a fresh warning of his doom:

'I understand Italian enough to know what she said! You needn't go, Mr. Aylmer, I am going myself. Oh, I wish I had been anywhere else! and I think—oh, I think you ought to be ashamed to look me in the face,' she added, unconsciously bursting into English.

She turned, and was running away. The duchess started up, and caught her arm.

'Let me alone!' cried Mary, so nearly out of her senses now that she did not know what she said or did; as she spoke, struggling wildly to free herself, but the duchess's lithe fingers clasped her wrist like a ring of iron.

'Go, Aylmer, go!' she commanded.

A dramatic scene was more than the wretched man could endure. He hurried out of the room, regardless of Mary's frantic appeal:

'Make her let me loose, Mr. Aylmer! Oh, I won't be held like this—I won't, I say!'

'Child, child!' the duchess exclaimed in French, assuming a tragic mien of mingled pain and fright, 'stand still! Listen! Do you want to be my ruin? Oh, let me explain!'

'I don't want any explanations,' cried Mary. 'It's none of my business, I suppose—only—only—oh, let me go!'

The duchess held her fast, put her disengaged hand before her face, and pretended to weep.

'Have pity,' she moaned, 'have pity! I was wrong to let him move me as he did. I —I— Ah, I wish I might trust you, dear child! you look so good—so kind!'

'I don't wish to be trusted,' retorted Mary bluntly. 'I only want to get away.'

'I have suffered so,' the duchess hurried on. 'Ah, you are too young yet to know how women can suffer! Do not be hard on me! Child, child! somewhere in your own life a recollection of this hour may rise to haunt you like a ghost, if you do not show me mercy. Remember, "Such measure as ye mete shall be meted to you again."'

To hear this woman dare to quote Scripture at this moment sounded a horrible blasphemy in Mary's ears. It destroyed her last shred of self-possession. She cried out in horror, making an insane effort to stop both ears at once with the fingers that were free.

'You will not be hard on me—I know you will not,' pursued the duchess, in artistically broken tones. 'Think what my life has been! Married to a man I loathe—a man whose fiendish cruelty——'

'I've nothing to do with your secrets,' broke in Mary.

'I admit that Mr. Aylmer was wrong,' pursued the duchess, regardless alike of the girl's disclaimers and her efforts to escape. 'It was only a moment of madness. His heart overpowered his reason.'

'Oh, if you *don't* let me go!'

'I cannot—oh, my God, girl, I cannot!' the duchess moaned, with an accent as full of despair as a shriek could have been, though careful to keep her voice scarcely above a whisper. 'You must hear in order to pity—in order to comprehend that I merit sympathy more than blame! Oh, he is wrong to love me, but human hearts are stronger than human reason. You will learn that one day!'

Each word increased Mary's disgust, forced her to harsher judgment; for indeed, when she rushed out from her post of unwilling observation, her interpretation of the scene was not founded upon such evil grounds as Giulia supposed. It centred almost wholly upon the fact that Aylmer was disloyal to Violet. But every syllable which fell from the woman's lips opened her listener's mind more and more to the signification which would have been patent to an older person at a glance.

'I should think a married woman would be ashamed to talk in that way!' exclaimed Mary, as the duchess paused to execute a sob of the most pathetic description. 'At least I am ashamed of you. Let me go!'

'So young, yet so hard,' sighed the signora.

'A flint couldn't be harder!' Mary almost shouted, and shocked the duchess, not by her assertions as to her hardness, but her allowing nature to subdue conventionality far enough to speak so loud, even when half-crazed by emotion. 'No, it couldn't!' added Mary, with fiercer energy, because she felt herself on the verge of tears.

'So, so!' returned the duchess, in an altered tone—and she looked full in the girl's face with an undisguised sneer. 'After all, what does the matter amount to? It speaks ill for your rearing—for your habits of mind, mademoiselle, that you are so ready to think evil!'

'Oh, I can endure you better when you talk like that than when you sob—I am sure it is more your real self speaks!' retorted Mary, anger mastering her desire to weep.

The duchess perceived that even in her distress the girl was too resolute to be browbeaten; she hastily took refuge in a compromise between indignation and terror.

'Do you mean to betray me?' she exclaimed. 'Do you mean to tell your garbled story to the world?'

'I never garble anything,' said Mary.

'What have I to do with telling the facts except to my cousin——'

'Oh, I am lost!' broke in the duchess. 'Violet Cameron hates me—she will never rest till everything is known.'

Mary ceased her struggles.

'Violet Cameron would not take so much trouble on your account,' said she. 'My cousin will no more betray your secrets than I shall!'

'You promise—you swear?'

'I'll promise nothing,' answered Mary, and finding her quiet had caused the duchess's grasp to relax, she snatched her wrist loose and was starting off, but the woman caught her gown, moaning:

'Promise, promise!'

'If you don't let me go I'll scream till I bring all the people in—I will!' cried Mary, lifting her voice till Giulia, perceiving she meant to carry out her threat, let her hand drop to her side.

Mary fled with the rapidity of a lapwing, the signora sending after her one long, low, harrowing groan, which might have touched the girl except for the momentary throwing off her disguise in which the lady had indulged. Mary's keen wits told her in that instant she

had had a glimpse of the real woman—the sentiment, the despair, did not go below the surface.

Hurrying through one of the smaller salons, Mary met Laurence Aylmer; he had stopped there automatically—stood dull and stupefied under his misery. The girl uttered a little cry, half of terror, half of disgust, and would have continued her flight, but he moved directly in front of her.

He hardly knew what he meant to say, since he could offer no explanation without putting the blame where it belonged, and the fact that the culprit was a woman forbade this; yet a wild idea crossed his mind of trying by some means to soften Mary's indignation, and prevent her telling Miss Cameron what she had seen.

'Miss Danvers,' he said, 'just one moment!'

'Let me pass!' cried she. 'How dare you stop me! I wonder even your assurance can go so far!'

'If you would take time to reflect—if I might at least ask you to be silent——'

'And now you want promises,' Mary broke in. 'I have none to make you, any more than I had to her.'

'Only listen an instant,' he said in a slow

choked voice. 'You might grant me so much. Remember, it is not long since you promised that we should be friends.'

But his very attempts to subdue his agitation seemed acting to Mary—a copying of the duchess's *rôle*—an additional insult.

'I'll not hear a word!' she said. 'I should think, if you have any decency, you would leave this house, and never attempt to set foot in it again. Shame on you—shame!'

Expostulations, entreaties, were useless; he stepped aside in silence. Mary rushed on with a fresh sob. Laurence Aylmer heard the rustle of female garments near the door; before he looked, he knew who stood there. The duchess had ruined his life, and his tongue must remain tied, because she was a woman.

'Mary, Mary!' Miss Cameron called, stopping short in astonishment and alarm; then as the girl darted forward, saw Giulia da Rimini peer in from the adjoining room, and quickly vanish.

Believing that she understood everything —her vague doubts of the past hours made certainties by the unmistakable significance of this scene—Violet turned with swift wrath

upon Laurence Aylmer, standing aloof, pale and dumb.

His eyes met her fiery glance unfalteringly; the face of a marble statue could not have been more immovable than his.

Mary flung herself into her cousin's arms; her strength was exhausted; she burst into a passion of tears, sobbing, 'Tell him to go. I—I am acting like a fool, but I can't help it. Oh, I shall die if he stays a moment longer; make him go!'

'May I ask you to leave me with my cousin?' Violet said, in a cold, ceremonious tone, which only deepened the effect of her anger. At the instant she again caught sight of the duchess peering in at the door, and Violet's wrath rose to such a height that she could not keep back the words which sprang to her lips—they uttered themselves before she knew she was speaking: 'I will bid you good-night, Mr. Aylmer.'

He gave one start, then stood motionless; his eyes on her face still; a wondering incredulity in his countenance, such as a man might wear when receiving an insult so deadly that at first his mind refused to accept its reality.

Violet comprehended what she had done—

absolutely turned him out of her house; but a half-born, frightened penitence died beneath the convulsive clasp of Mary's arms—the agony of Mary's voice as it moaned in her ear: 'Make him go—make him go!'

Laurence Aylmer straightened himself like a person struggling against the effect of a powerful physical blow; he stepped forward; his eyes burned into Violet's with a fire which surpassed that in hers; as he passed her, he bowed his head, saying, 'Good-night, Miss Cameron,' and was gone. He walked through the corridor as if treading the deck of a ship in a storm; the floor seemed to heave beneath his feet, the walls to waver to and fro; a roar like the surge of billows deafened his ears; an icy perspiration, like the spray from wintry waves, bedewed his forehead. He reached the ante-chamber, a servant handed him his coat and hat.

'Please give me your arm downstairs; I can scarcely stand,' said the duchess's voice, close behind him.

He looked at her, and a dreadful wrath shook his soul; a mad impulse to throttle her, as any wild animal with cruel instincts ought to be slain, to prevent its working further harm.

'Laurence, Laurence, give me your arm!' she repeated, grasping it as she spoke, as if unable to support herself.

At the instant, several men came out together from the salons, joined them, talked gaily, and, to Aylmer's relief, hovered about the duchess as they went downstairs, even stood beside the carriage after she had entered it.

But she found an opportunity to whisper: 'To-morrow, Laurence, to-morrow!'

He stepped back without the slightest sign of having caught her words.

CHAPTER VII.

EACH BLUNDERS.

Violet had no time to spend in consoling Mary, or to reflect upon her dismissal of Aylmer—she must return to her guests.

'You had better go to your room, dear,' she said kindly; 'I will come to you as soon as these tiresome people are gone.'

'Oh, I wish I had stayed there!' said Mary. 'I know you must be vexed with me! If I hadn't been tired and upset I should not have behaved so like an idiot—but—but——'

A sob checked her utterance in spite of all her efforts to restrain her emotion.

'Vexed with you?' said Violet, kissing her. 'Don't think me capable of it! Now go, dear; somebody might come in.'

Mary hurried away, and Violet went back to her duties.

Miss Bronson met her with a mien of sorrowful severity.

'Some of your visitors are gone without being able to bid you adieu,' she said. 'This may be in keeping with continental customs, but I own such negligence on your part surprises me beyond expression.'

'Perhaps the rest will kindly follow suit very soon,' Violet answered, trying to laugh. 'Who has been considerate enough to set the example?'

'Mr. Aylmer has just given Madame da Rimini his arm downstairs—several gentlemen——'

Violet did not pause to hear the close of the sentence; Miss Bronson looked after her with saintly, pitying indignation, and shivered in dread under a prophetic conviction that unless she could persuade her friend to exchange that heathen land for the refuge of Protestant climes, the misguided creature's soul would be lost beyond a peradventure.

It seemed an almost endless period to Violet before she regained her liberty, but the latest loiterers departed at length—she said good-night to Eliza, and hastened towards her own rooms. Suddenly the impatience with which she had awaited the breaking up

of the party was succeeded by a regret that the people had not remained and so deferred a little longer the explanation she must listen to from Mary. The scene she had interrupted left little chance of doubt that the suspicions in regard to Aylmer and the duchess, for which she had so bitterly reproached herself as a gross injustice to him, were to be verified, and worse than all the rest was the thought of Mary's trouble. The poor girl had not only to endure the ache of her wounded heart, but the way in which her dream had been dispelled must make the pain still harder to bear.

After Clarice had ended her ministrations and disappeared, Violet sat still, hoping that Mary might have fallen asleep, which would afford a respite until the morrow, and give them both an opportunity to reach at least an appearance of composure. But as she was thinking this, the door of the adjoining room opened, and her cousin called, in an appealing tone :

'Do come, Violet—do !'

Miss Cameron obeyed the summons without an instant's hesitation, rendered desperate rather than courageous by a sudden intolerable pain away down in her soul—a pain

separate from her sympathy for Mary, her hot indignation towards Aylmer—so purely personal that it roused her to rage and scorn against herself.

'I thought perhaps you were asleep, and so would not disturb you,' she said, as she entered the chamber.

'Oh, I feel as if I should never sleep again,' cried Mary, pushing her hair back from her forehead with quick, impatient hands. She had turned the lamp low, but the shadows falling on her face only deepened the traces left by excitement and tears. 'Sit down, Violet, please. I've been thinking—thinking. I almost made up my mind not to tell you—but I ought—it would be wicked not to.'

'Tell me,' said Violet, seating herself with her back to the light.

'I feel—oh, I don't know how to express it!' exclaimed Mary. 'I feel *soiled*—to discover that such wickedness really exists! I have read in books, of course—I am not a baby—but actually to know that a married woman can let a man make love to her——'

She broke off with a shudder; Violet shuddered too, with the same overpowering

sense of abasement which any pure woman must endure when brought face to face with sins whose existence has hitherto belonged to the record of personally unproven facts.

'And—and,' continued Mary, 'when one has respected the man—thought him so good —oh, it is dreadful!'

Dreadful indeed! True, the discovery that the hero to whom her young heart had gone out was unworthy the gift, might help the sooner to bring a cure of her sufferings, but at first it would make the sharpest sting in their pangs. Mary's words showed, however, that she did not mean to behave like a weak, ordinary girl; she had no mind to pour out love-sick confessions and appeals for sympathy. Violet felt an increased respect for a nature which, even in this earliest, supreme agitation, retained pride and dignity enough to hold fast to its secrets, and reflected that on her own part great care must be taken to avoid any sign of suspecting that other emotions than outraged modesty and grief at discovering the worthlessness of a valued friend had a share in Mary's agitation.

'I am sorry—oh, so sorry!' she faltered, forced to speak lest her silence should appear strange, but able as yet to find no fitter

speech than these commonplace ejaculations of regret.

'Oh, I am sorry too; but that doesn't mend matters—it only make them worse!' cried Mary, almost sharply. 'If one didn't care, it would be easy enough to put it all by; just let them both alone for always, and never think of them.'

'And is that what must be done in any case?' Violet asked, with a certain maidenly hesitation which Mary appreciated.

'Oh, I know what your voice means!' she said. 'You feel that you ought to hear, and you can't bear to listen. Indeed, indeed, I wouldn't tell if I could help it. If it was only what I saw, I'd try to think I was coarse—suspicious—wicked—only, only how could I?' Oh, Violet, she had her head on his shoulder!'

Mary put her hand before her eyes for a moment; Violet turned sick and cold, and sat trembling from head to foot.

'After that,' she said presently, 'there could be no possibility of your accusing yourself of unjust suspicions.'

The firm ring of her voice gave Mary courage; she had told the whole story in one abrupt speech, after trying gradually to break

her news; she had told, and Violet had been able to listen with perfect composure. But the blow had gone home, Mary could not doubt; her shrewd perception had weeks before taught her that this man was more to her beautiful cousin than any other of his sex, and in her quiet, reasoning fashion she had followed the line of Violet's scruples and arguments against the folly of affection (of course never dreaming she herself counted in Miss Cameron's determined abnegation) with a perspicuity which many women of double her age and experience would not have shown.

The strongest tide of sympathy which Mary's eminently just but somewhat circumscribed mind and heart had ever felt, rushed over her in this moment. She was the most undemonstrative of creatures—partly from shyness, partly from an idea that protestations were silly and girlish—but the impulse which made her pause when she had half risen with outstretched arms, eager to enfold and shelter Violet, did not spring from either motive. She recollected that such behaviour might cause Violet the humiliation of dreading that any human being could suppose she required comfort; and

Mary knew the proud woman would bear her pain unflinchingly if only she might believe it unsuspected by others. So the girl dropped back into her seat, and Violet thought she had been upon the point of breaking down completely, but had checked herself in season to restrain a confession which, however much its utterance might relieve her for the moment, would always afterwards remain the bitterest memory of this bitter woe.

Mary's emotions of horror and sympathetic grief suddenly changed to a burst of anger against the woman through whose assistance such pain had come to Violet.

'She ought to be burned alive! Oh, at least you will never let her enter your house again!'

'I cannot exclude her and receive him,' Miss Cameron replied slowly, wondering a little if the girl, like so many of her sex, was ready to seek excuses for the man by throwing the onus of blame upon the sharer of his evil conduct. 'I know, Mary, that many people—even good people—act as if there was one law for men and another for women, but I cannot do this—I will not!'

'No!' cried Mary. 'Oh, I hope I shall never see his face again! And he was a

coward, too—he skulked off! And to think of her daring to hold me fast and begging for sympathy! She actually did! She was so wretched, and his tenderness had gone straight to her heart, and—and—oh, I tell you, Violet, I feel soiled, degraded!'

And Mary burst into tears again.

'No wonder, dear child, no wonder!'

'When I got away from her and her dreadful confessions, he met me! I suppose he had had time to think what to say. He was less reckless than she, and wanted me to believe it all meant nothing—but she had made that impossible,' Mary hurried on, eager to finish the revolting details, though urged by a sense of duty to render everything clear. 'He said—oh, never mind his words—I don't remember them!'

Her abrupt pause, her horrified face, were proofs to Violet that the man had chosen that moment of all others to declare his love, believing in his arrogant vanity that he could by such avowal effectually blind the girl.

'What he said is of no consequence,' Violet answered.

'No, no! But he wanted me to keep it from you—then I flamed out—then you came—that is all!'

'That is all!' Violet involuntarily repeated, with such bitter significance in her tone that Mary's sobs increased.

'Oh, if I had not seen it!' she exclaimed. 'Not that he might have gone on deceiving us, but if somebody else had gone there instead of me!'

'My dear, perhaps we should have been inclined to doubt—we cannot now. It is hard to have one's eyes opened, but in such a case the sooner the better—you feel this?'

'Yes, if you do—I mean, of course!' returned Mary, tacking on the last clause with great energy while she dried her eyes.

'Then there is no more to be said just now,' observed Violet.

'Oh, it is no good to talk and talk—nothing ever comes of it!' cried Mary, comprehending that Violet longed to be alone. 'I am sure we ought both to be in bed—it is fearfully late.'

Violet thought the girl afraid of prolonging the conversation lest she should yet betray herself, and rose at once. The two cousins kissed each other quietly and separated. Mary crept to her pillow and lay there with head and heart in a whirl of misery which made all past trouble look small as childish griefs.

It seemed actually as if an earthquake had desolated the world, leaving utter chaos in its wake. Warner gone; Aylmer treacherous; Violet wretched—the whole combination of horrors so complete, so unexpected, it appeared like a dreadful dream—all except the pain—that was real enough; but it spoke volumes for Mary's unselfishness that even in these first hours, sympathy for her cousin was so strong that it claimed an equal place with the personal grief which had smitten her so recently.

No tumult disturbed Violet's mind; no feverish agitation quickened her pulses; a deathly coldness enveloped her soul, amid which her thoughts fluttered like birds gone astray into the depths of an Arctic winter, and freezing slowly amid its awful chill.

It would have been very different to relinquish Aylmer to Mary, believing such renunciation for their mutual happiness, from losing him through the conviction of his worthlessness. In the former case she would at least have kept him a place in memory as her ideal of manly perfection; but now—now! And worst of all, her weak heart lifted its voice and moaned bitterly over its fallen idol. It had been comparatively easy to

stifle its rebellious complaints while she deemed him worthy of Mary—considered it plainly a duty, for his sake, to cure that passing fancy towards herself, and foster, by every means in her power, his affection for this good, pure girl—but it was different now. Her ideal did not exist. The man to whom she had given its likeness ranked among the false and vicious of his sex! And she had loved him!—yes, loved him still! She could not deny this truth; and so stood abased in her own sight.

Violet did not fall asleep until after daylight; but though her dull, heavy slumber lasted for hours, it brought no repose: she woke oppressed by the same sense of intense physical and mental fatigue which had been her last conscious sensation.

She rang for Clarice, who speedily appeared with the tea-tray, and the information that the clock had struck eleven. Violet saw a note lying on her plate. Her first thought was that Aylmer had ventured to write with some audacious hope of redeeming himself, even yet, in her estimation. But Clarice said:

'Miss Mary bade me bring that letter to mademoiselle; she could not wait any longer.'

'Has she gone out?' Violet asked, marvelling at the girl's energy.

'Two hours ago; in such haste to get to her work! Truly, truly, I never saw so active a demoiselle; she is always busy,' said Clarice, shaking her head, perhaps to express doubt whether such great industry was exactly decorous in a young lady.

Violet motioned the woman to leave her, and hastily opened the billet.

'I shall not speak of what has happened unless you do,' Mary wrote. 'I am sorry I let myself betray so much excitement; but I know I did right in telling you. Please forgive me, and be sure I love you dearly, and am very grateful to you, though I have so little ability to express what I feel, that if you were not the best and most generous woman in the world, you would very often doubt both my affection and my gratitude.'

Brief as the note was, its composition cost Mary a great deal of trouble. She wanted to make Violet feel at ease in her society; certain of not being irritated and hurt by open speech or galling allusions; yet to leave her undisturbed by any suspicion of the motive which caused such reticence.

Violet read, and thought: 'The brave girl:

she goes the right way to work to cure herself, and she will do it. Ah, she is young! They can live past everything, those young people.'

The proud woman shed a few tears in her solitude, but they were an additional pang instead of a relief; it was disgraceful for her to sit and cry like some miss in her teens. She felt harder towards Laurence Aylmer with each burning drop that fell from her eyes. This should be the end; she would receive neither him nor the woman again; if necessary, in order to avoid comments and questions, she would leave Florence very soon. After all, perhaps this might be her best course. A change would benefit Mary; she could pursue her art studies in Rome or Paris, and might find life easier when set free from the associations which haunt a spot where one has known bitter grief, becoming daily and hourly reminders which help sorrow to retain its tyrannical sway.

CHAPTER VIII.

HER LAST EFFORT.

When Laurence Aylmer hurried away from Miss Cameron's house, the uppermost sensation in the chaotic whirl of his mind was a fierce indignation against her; a wondering horror mingled therewith, if it could be really true that so dire an insult had been heaped upon him. Absolutely turned out of doors, dismissed with cold sternness, like an impertinent lackey! It was so incredible, so unlike any slight or injury which a gentleman could imagine ever befalling him, that it appeared fairly a delusion. Aylmer almost expected to wake suddenly, find himself in his own rooms, and discover that the events of the evening existed only in his troubled fancy.

He wandered about the streets for hours, not returning to his lodgings until chill

gleams of light warned him that day was at hand. He slept for awhile, and dreamed of sitting beside Violet, and telling the story of his love. Not the faintest shadow separated their souls—not a recollection of the past month's unrest, or the night's bitter trouble, disturbed the course of that beatific vision. Of course, when the mocking dream faded, its contrast to the truth rendered reality more odious; but his first excitement had died, his anger was gone. No wonder Miss Cameron had dealt him that verbal blow. She must have caught Mary Danvers's passionate outbreak—must have seen the duchess peer in at the door. He had, even amid the confusion of his faculties, likened her to some devil incarnate, pausing to exult over its evil work.

The ruin was irremediable. Mary would describe the whole scene to her cousin; the incoherent appeal he had attempted must only appear an additional proof of his guilt. Yes, the duchess had ruined his every hope. To tell the truth would only cover him with deeper infamy; Miss Cameron's verdict, and every other person's, would be that a man capable of intimating a woman had made love to him, was so mean, that even though he could prove his assertion, he deserved a greater

measure of contempt than if he bore in silence the most sweeping circumstantial evidence against himself.

The day passed; he could not bear to go out—to meet people—to be fretted by idle talk. He began several letters to Miss Cameron, and tore them up in turn; each seemed more insane than its predecessor in its vague demands for her merciful judgment upon an occurrence concerning which he had no explanation to offer. Sometimes he passionately upbraided her in his thoughts, and anathematised his own folly for supposing that she could ever be brought to care for him. Had she felt the slightest tenderness she must have been less hasty and absolute in her condemnation. Then his mood would change, and he admitted that she was right to behave as she had; no pure-minded woman could have acted otherwise. Had he been her betrothed husband, her affection might well have stopped short of the possibility of faith in his blamelessness.

Late in the afternoon he rode out; made a pretence of dining at a little osteria miles away from Florence, and returned late in the evening, having had at least the comfort of escaping the sight of a familiar face.

A note lay on his writing-table. It was from the Signora da Rimini. He felt inclined to tear the billet up unread; but that would be silly; so he opened it, sickened by its perfume, angry at the illegibility of the chirography, which rendered much close attention necessary in order to decipher the page.

'Have you forgotten that I told you I should expect to see you to-day, dear friend? I have waited in vain, and your failure to keep your promise seems unkind—although I will not wrong you by so harsh a word, even in my thoughts, since you must know how great need I have of your advice.

'Heaven only can imagine the tales that idiotic girl may invent! I trust to your friendship, whatever happens, since it was through my friendship for *you* that the trouble arose. I need not say that I forgive you: this note is of itself a proof.'

Go near her! Not he! Let her say and do what she pleased: she was powerless to harm him further. She had ruined his life; let her rest content with her work, and leave him alone!

The next day, a commission which he had received from the professor took him into the street where the odious woman lived. He

was hurrying past the gloomy old palace without even a glance, but, as he reached the entrance, a carriage drove up. He raised his eyes, and saw the duchess. She leaned forward, and said: 'I am back just in time to receive your visit. Thanks for coming. I thought I should find you on my return.'

She gave him one of her sweetest smiles, but a quick fancy crossed his mind that the great black eyes held a certain menace in their slumbrous depths. He stood for a second irresolute whether he should go in or walk on regardless of her speech; saw her look back; took a sudden resolution and followed the landau into the courtyard. So much the better if she were angry, and showed it by bitter or upbraiding words; in that case her conduct might afford him the relief of frank, honest avowals.

By the time he traversed the quadrangle the footman had opened the carriage-door; the duchess was waiting. He could do no less than offer his arm for her to descend, and she kept her hand upon it as they mounted the stairs, talking pleasantly the while about indifferent matters, but with an audible tremor in her voice, intended to impress upon him the fact that her idle remarks were only for

the benefit of the servant who followed with her wraps.

They reached her favourite salon; the instant the door closed behind the domestic, the duchess flung herself into a seat, and put both hands before her face, exclaiming:

'Oh, Aylmer, Aylmer, how could you leave me all this dreary time without a word of consolation or advice!'

She had made up her mind what to do; if any encouragement on her part would lead him into an exhibition of tenderness, such encouragement should not be wanting; whatever his real feelings, she would take him away from Violet Cameron if it were possible.

'Without a word,' she repeated. 'Oh, it was cruel, cruel!'

Each syllable she uttered only added to his exasperation; the very grace of her attitude only made him think of a snake, and increased his loathing.

'I could not suppose that my coming was of the slightest importance, or my advice either, if I had any to offer upon any subject,' he answered, in a voice elaborately courteous, but hard as iron.

The duchess peeped at him through her fingers; the face she saw was hard as the

voice which had warned her that so far her burst of emotion produced no visible effect.

'Both were of vital consequence,' she said. 'Think of the position in which I am placed; my reputation at the mercy of that girl and her cousin; a garbled story likely to reach my husband's ears—and I am afraid of him; yes, afraid!'

She still kept her hands raised, and sobbed and choked in the most artistic manner; but Laurence would have appeared deaf and utterly indifferent, had it not been for the obstinate expression which showed in every feature.

'Aylmer, Aylmer!' she exclaimed piteously, as he remained silent under her appeals.

'I can assure you of one thing,' he said slowly, 'you have no need to disquiet yourself where those ladies are concerned.'

She let her hands drop; her eyes flashed as she asked:

'They talked with you; what did they say? I insist upon knowing; I have the right——'

'Oh, it is very easy to tell,' he interrupted, with a bitter little laugh. 'Miss Cameron asked me to leave her house; our interview began and ended with that request.'

'*Dio mio*!' groaned the duchess, and hid

her face again, but this time to conceal the exultation she knew it must betray. Was that all? what did you do?'

'I found it quite enough,' he replied; 'I obeyed, of course! I think I met you and gave you my arm downstairs.'

The duchess had found leisure to school her countenance anew. She rose suddenly, hesitated for a second, then hurried towards him, holding out both hands.

'Don't mind,' she said, her voice trembling with an eagerness which was unfeigned. 'If my friendship can be of the slightest comfort, be sure you have it! Oh, I was selfish; see, I don't care! No matter what comes, I am your friend; no matter at what cost, I am ready to prove it.'

Aylmer did not offer to take the extended hands; he looked full at her, and said with a cold smile:

'Madame da Rimini does me too much honour. Our brief acquaintance could afford me no claim to accept a sacrifice of any sort from her goodness.'

'It would be none!' she exclaimed, laying her clasped hands on his shoulder. 'Oh, Alymer, don't you understand?'

He did not stir—not a line of his face changed.

'I ought perhaps to be able to thank you for your offered friendship,' he said, in the same chill, monotonous tone, 'but I am a dull man; at present I can only think of the one thing which is of any moment in my life.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, removing her hands from his shoulder and retreating a few steps, the better to look at him with her angry eyes.

'I mean that I have lost the last hope of winning the one woman I ever loved, or ever shall love,' he answered.

Certainly, when he entered the room he had no thought of making the confession, but her words and manner goaded him into such wrath that it was a relief to fling the avowal at her, for the meekest man alive could not have helped admitting to himself that the lady meant him to be tender and adoring.

'You love Violet Cameron!' the duchess fairly gasped.

'With all my heart and soul!' he replied steadily.

The woman turned livid through her rouge; her eyes blazed; her hands involuntarily clenched themselves, as she hissed out:

'You tell me that to my face—you dare!'

'I thought such frankness the best proof I could give of how thoroughly I appreciate the offer of friendship you just made,' returned he; and now a faint tone of mockery was audible in his slow, passionless speech.

The duchess retreated still farther; one hand caught at the ruff which encircled her throat—her eyes were positively terrible as they glanced towards a dagger lying upon the table by her side—and the fingers of the other hand worked convulsively, as if ready to seize it. Her Sicilian blood was roused to its hottest fury; the animal instinct to kill—destroy—seized her with its fullest might.

In another instant she dropped into a chair, and pointed to the door.

'Go out!' she said, in a voice so choked that, except for the gesture, her words would have been unintelligible. 'Go this instant!'

'Good-morning, madame,' Aylmer said, as calmly as if ending the most commonplace interview.

He bowed as he spoke, and walked away. Before he had taken a dozen steps he heard her call imperiously:

'Stop!'

He turned slowly; the duchess moved for-

ward till she stood within a few paces of him; her face was actually distorted with rage, and her eyes glared like a panther's.

'You have insulted me,' she said, in a breathless way. 'In my country we avenge insults, do you know?'

'In what manner have I erred, madame?' he asked composedly.

'So you wanted to marry Violet Cameron!' she hurried on. 'Well, you shall never do it—remember that!'

'I had just informed you, madame, that any such hope had been killed in my heart,' he answered.

'Your heart!' she repeated. 'You have none. You wanted her money—everybody knows that—don't try to deceive me!'

Aylmer started as if she had struck him; checked the words which sprang to his lips; bowed again, and walked on. The duchess rushed past, and stood between him and the door.

'Wait till I have finished!' she ordered; 'even a barbarian from America should have knowledge enough of civilised usages to show as much decency as that!'

'I am listening, madame.'

It was well the duchess had not the dagger

within reach at this instant; she certainly would have stabbed him before getting her senses back sufficiently to reflect. She shut her eyes for a little; her head reeled, and she saw every object through a sort of red haze, from the force with which the blood mounted to her brain.

'You lie when you say you have given up hope!' she cried. 'You think to make your peace by sacrificing me! You will say that I made love to you; why, you are such a dolt that perhaps you thought I meant to—thought I cared for you! Come, I'll tell you the truth—that shall be the beginning of my revenge!'

Her breath failed her again—she was obliged to pause. He stood waiting till she should be pleased to continue.

'I hated Violet Cameron,' she went on presently. 'I knew it would fret her to see any man devoted to me—not that she cared for you, or ever would have done. And I had another reason for wanting your attentions: because, if I seemed to tolerate them, it would tease another man—a man I love. Do you hear?'

'Shall I leave you now, madame?' asked Aylmer.

'And if she had been fool enough to love

you,' pursued the duchess, 'you should not have her! If there were a hope of your making your peace, I'd ruin it, if I had to swear that you had been my lover—yes, I would! Let me tell you the person she loves as much as she is capable of loving—Carlo Magnoletti; and he wanted her to marry you because that would make matters easier for him—he told me so——'

Before she could end her sentence, Aylmer was gone. He hurried out of the house. A fiacre was passing as he reached the street; he hailed it, jumped in, and bade the coachman drive to the Porta Romana, and then take the Strada dei Colli—the picturesque road which winds up the hill of San Miniato, on whose summit frowns the old convent that Michel Angelo once fortified. Near by stands the cypress-guarded little church which the great sculptor called his 'country maid;' and just below stretches the piazza bearing his name, with a bronze statue of the David lifting his inspired front to the blue sky.

Aylmer dismissed the carriage at the top of the ascent, and wandered about; saw the sun set over the beautiful city nestled in the valley beneath; saw the twilight shadows gather over Monte Morello and the long range of purple

hills ; watched the moon rise and glorify every object with its radiance ; and felt, as we all do in moments of keen suffering, that every sight and sound of beauty and peace became an additional pang.

At last he descended the zigzag paths and flights of steps which lead directly down to the Porta San Niccolo, crossed the Ponte alle Grazie (or rather, the modern structure which the mania for improving and destroying has given us in place of the old bridge, with its storied dwellings where sanctified nuns dwelt in other days), and returned to his lodgings.

The porter told him that his German friend had called during his absence—'the fierce signore with the beard.' So the professor had come back sooner than he intended ; but Aylmer could not feel sorry at having missed him. The keen-eyed savant would quickly have discovered that something was amiss, and been troubled by Lawrence's inability to explain, though no doubt he would have taken great pains to hide his disquietude under an affectation of extreme crustiness.

Aylmer found several letters lying on his table, and he opened them one after another, more to occupy his thoughts for a few

minutes than because he cared to learn their contents.

Among them was an epistle from America, brnging news of the death of the relative after whom he inherited the large fortune which had been hers for life—a distant cousin of his father's whom he had seen but twice, so that no regret for her loss could mingle with his reflections.

There was also unlooked-for tidings in regard to those speculations he had been drawn into by George Danvers. One of the mines had resumed work, a new drift having been discovered, so valuable that stockholders might soon expect to receive dividends; and the prosperous state of affairs was considered so certain by competent judges, that the shares had already gone up enough in the market to render their sale a profitable affair to any person who wished to be rid of his portion.

And the good tidings came, as it so often does to mortals, at the very moment when it seemed an added mockery on the part of fate, after snatching away the only gift which could bring happiness.

Aylmer flung the letters upon the table, and buried his face in his hands. For the time even his courage, his power of endurance,

had deserted him ; his burthen seemed harder than he could bear.

And the duchess ?

A few seconds after Aylmer's departure, the door of an inner salon opened. Madame da Rimini looked up, and saw Giorgio Dimetri standing upon the threshold, intently regarding her, with a smile upon his handsome, evil face.

'What are you doing there ?' she called.

'The servant informed me that you had a visitor. Like a well-bred creature I waited in the next room till he took his departure,' replied the Greek. 'Of course I was bound to wait, because you had appointed this time for another little trial, to be certain that you are perfect in the art of dealing cards at baccarat.'

The duchess looked at him fixedly.

'You could hear every word,' she said. 'That door does not latch. How long were you in the other room ?'

'Only a few minutes,' he answered. 'I heard you tell the American your reasons for wanting his attentions.'

'Dimetri !' cried the duchess, 'you say you love me—you say you are jealous of that man —yet you let him live—you, the best swordsman in Italy—you that are one of the few

men living who know the secret of Lachasse's thrust!'

She spoke very quietly—an awful smile on her lips.

'I love you,' he replied; and though his voice was as low as hers, it he'd a ring of repressed passion, accentuated by the eager light in his eyes. 'He lives because you told me that if I quarrelled with him I should never see your face again. I have been very patient, and I am not a patient man——'

'You have the proof that I told you the truth when I said I was playing a game where he was concerned,' she interrupted.

'I have proof, at least, that you hate him now—and after?'

'Ah,' exclaimed the duchess, with an indescribable emphasis of ferocity, 'the rest is in your hands! Go away—I am in no mood for baccarat—go!'

'And when shall I come back?'

'When you have done your work,' she answered.

For a moment they stood gazing full into each other's eyes with glances of terrible significance. Then the duchess waved her hand in dismissal, and he went silently out of the room.

CHAPTER IX.

STILL HER WORK.

Mary Danvers stood in one of the library-windows, looking out through the twilight across the shadowy garden. During these two days no allusion had been made by Violet or herself to that evening whose events gave so much occupation to the minds of both. Mary knew that her cousin suffered terribly, little sign as she gave. Violet marvelled at the courage with which the girl supported the blow that had befallen her, but, fearful of inflicting fresh wounds, abstained from sympathy either in look or word; and Mary, animated by similar feelings, was equally careful in her turn.

Could Violet have known the truth in regard to her young relative, she might have admired her courage even more, for Mary was bearing that heaviest of human burthens

—suspense; bearing it too with the consciousness that these were only the birth-throes of a pain which might last an indefinite time—months—years—oh, perhaps never to be stilled in this world.

But her dread of exaggeration—her method of rigidly inspecting all matters to be certain what was real, what fancy (a habit not growing out of any lack of imagination, only the result of guarding against the encroachments of that faculty upon the judgment), stood her in good stead now, and prevented the unmeasured grief which most persons of her age would have indulged.

Gilbert Warner had gone away loving her —common-sense assured her there was every evidence of this, and therefore she could not think their separation lasting, dolorous as the circumstances rendered it.

Impossible for her to make any sign so long as he remained silent—the bare chance that her first fears might have held some truth must hinder her—but she could wait! And there were things in her favour; he would communicate with his friends, learn at length that his suspicions of her caring for another were unfounded, and the knowledge might of itself open his eyes.

The proofs which brought her so great comfort grew in number and strength as she reviewed the course of their acquaintance. Why, the very keeping the portrait he had painted for Violet was enough to show that he had not been indifferent. And he had kept it, she knew—it was to follow him on his journey—Miss Vaughton had told her so the morning after his departure. When Mary reached the studio, she found the venerable lady in a state of great wonderment and regret, declaring over and over, according to the habit of women of her type when surprised by unexpected tidings, that anybody might have knocked her down with a feather on the reception of the news.

'Why, you had not been gone but a little while when he came bustling in—so hurried he had hardly time to say good-bye—and no wonder, with his trunks to pack yet, and forty other things to do. I'm sure he must have forgotten half he wanted to take—not an under-shirt with him, I'll warrant—young men are so careless!'

Mary, busy with her own reflections, lost the thread of the old lady's discourse, and the benefit of a harrowing tale of what had once befallen a youthful relative of Miss

Vaughton's, from forgetfulness of those useful garments.

When she could listen again, the prophetess was chanting slowly :

'But, as he said, if he had got here too late he could go to the house and see you. Yes, indeed ; of course you were surprised—I don't need to be told that,' she added, as defiantly as if Mary had cast a slight upon her by protestations of astonishment. 'And one box to be sent after him—James offered to attend to it—the pictures couldn't be packed in time. Oh, I was not to mention about that——'

'Mention what ?' Mary asked, as the old lady paused and stared in a helpless way.

'Yes, to be sure ! Or was it the studio man's trying to cheat I was not to speak of ?' pursued Miss Vaughton. 'Really, with so much put on one's mind all at once, no wonder one gets confused—now is it ?'

'Certainly not ! But there can be no secret connected with his—Mr. Warner's pictures,' said Mary.

'Ah, one never knows what there may be secrets about in a young man's life !' cried Miss Vaughton, with an air of profound wisdom. 'Not but what Gilbert is a model

—no danger of *his* secrets being wrong—no, no—don't tell me that—*no*body—no*body* need tell me that!'

'So the pictures are to be packed and sent after him,' continued Mary, regardless of this energetic outburst, in her desire to learn if the thought which sprang up in her mind was well founded.

'Oh yes—now if that was the secret, or whether it was about Miss Lane—oh no, it was Leonard Gowan who was engaged to her! Dear me, so many young men and their affairs—and always the same—though Gilbert's worry was over his pictures too; but worry as he might they couldn't be packed in time—and he put yours in because he said he wanted to work on it more. Oh, I wasn't to mention it; but no matter, it is your cousin he wants to surprise with it, and you are not her, though Mary, as good a girl as ever lived, I know; and what is beauty—skin deep—not to say you are plain and may equal her yet, though James says she really is a marvel, and enough to drive a sculptor or painter mad; though, as I told him, good gracious, that's not the sort of thing to say of any lady, married or not; and, Mary, it really is odd, with all her admirers——'

But luckily her old tyrant of a servant summoned her at the instant, and left Mary free to reflect on that one clause in her rambling account so pregnant with meaning.

News she had this day received from America helped to render hopefulness easier. If matters went on as they had begun, her father's debts could be paid, and his memory freed from any aspersion. Ah! in the presence of such probability she would be utterly wicked to sit down and moan over her own private woes; then, too, the fact that a change so unexpected, so cheering, could come in regard to things which had seemed irrevocably settled, was a good omen for Fate's kindness in other particulars, however dark the present might look.

Mary's meditations were interrupted by her cousin's entrance.

'Have we kept you waiting for dinner until you are famished?' Violet asked, as she approached the window.

'Oh no, I had pleasant company,' Mary answered, holding up her book; then her troublesome conscience smote her, as it always did at the slightest approach to prevarication; but Miss Bronson appeared at the instant

and made herself involuntarily the aid of conscience, as it was natural so virtuous a woman always should.

'My dear, I hope you were not trying to read by this dim light,' she said; 'there is nothing so bad for the eyes.'

'No; I shut my book some time since,' returned Mary.

'I was glad you did not go with us,' continued Miss Cameron; 'the tramontana is blowing, and it would have been bad for your throat.'

'I think you ought to tie something round your neck, Mary,' added Miss Bronson.

'It is so warm here!' pleaded she.

'And one is so hideous muffled up; I'd rather have a sore throat, I am sure,' cried Miss Cameron.

'What a sentiment! what an example to set Mary if she were to believe you in earnest!' ejaculated Eliza.

But her expostulations were checked by a servant's announcing Professor Schmidt.

'He wanted to make sure you were visible,' called the savant, 'but I would not wait; I came on purpose to get my dinner, and I must have it! How do you all do? You look like the three Fates in this gloom,' he continued,

for the Professor had a horror of sitting in the twilight.

'I think you might find a more poetical comparison to greet us with, after your cruel absence,' said Violet, hurrying forward to meet him with out-stretched hands. 'I am delighted to see you back! We did not venture to hope for that pleasure before to-morrow; and how nice of you to think of coming to dine with us.'

'I always like to gratify my worthy friend Adolf Schmidt when I can,' replied the Professor. 'Besides, when I got home I found the tailor had sent me a new dress-coat, and I wanted you all to admire it.'

Even Miss Bronson laughed heartily at the recollections aroused by his words, and the old savant released Violet's hands from his sturdy grasp, and passed on to seize the spinster's with the energy which he put into every action.

'My dear Miss Bronson, I am glad to find that you have survived my absence! I have been greatly troubled—was on the point of turning back before I reached Bologna. I had such terrible fears that my departure really might be more than your sensitive nature could endure; but you seem to have borne it better than I dared to hope.'

'I consoled myself by looking forward to your return,' replied the spinster, with an appreciation she seldom vouchsafed his humorously teasing speeches.

'And how is my American sweetbriar?' continued the professor, addressing Mary. 'It is so dark, I can't see any of your faces. Of all unaccountable fancies, this sitting in Cimmerian blackness is the most outrageous.'

'Luckily, here comes Antonio to announce dinner,' said Violet; 'so give me your arm, professor, and you shall be taken in search of a little light.'

They were scarcely seated at table before the savant asked:

'And how is Laurence Aylmer? I drove to his rooms on my way from the station, but the wretched fellow was out.'

It chanced that Violet and Mary were glancing towards each other as the professor spoke, and both averted their eyes with a sort of guilty consciousness.

'Quite well, I fancy,' Miss Cameron said indifferently.

'Why, Violet,' exclaimed Miss Bronson 'he has not been here for two days—not since your reception—and he went away so suddenly that I thought it odd!'

'Two days—what an immense period!' said Violet, laughing. 'You see, professor, that Miss Bronson is as accurate as ever.'

'Yes, yes, I see,' returned the professor, his quick ear struck by an undefinable something in Violet's tone, carelessly as she spoke; but she began asking questions about his little excursion to Verona, and he followed the lead she gave the conversation.

In a few minutes, however, he again made mention of Aylmer. He noticed that it was Miss Bronson who replied; and this time Mary began talking of something else as soon as the spinster gave her an opportunity.

Before the dinner had half ended, the professor felt confident that something had happened to offend Miss Cameron, and that Mary Danvers shared in the secret; but what his beloved Laurence could have done to annoy her was more than he could conceive, and he could not at present relieve his mind by any inquiries.

The professor's spectacled eyes could see very clearly if he had special motives therefor; and when Violet avoided hearing some mention he made of Madame da Rimini, he could have sworn that the woman was at the bottom of whatever disturbance or misconception had

arisen. He had many times warned his two favourites, and the Magnoletti also, that if they continued to tolerate the duchess she would work mischief in some fashion, though he had expected Carlo's gambling propensities to cause the trouble rather than any ability on her part to alienate Miss Cameron and Aylmer.

However, the dinner passed off gaily enough, and Violet seemed in her usual spirits. While they were taking coffee, she said :

'Professor, you must do me a favour. I am going to Lady Harcourt's. You have never been, in spite of all her invitations. Now, be amiable, and accompany me. There will only be a few people—people you know, too.'

'Ugh !' said the professor, with a grimace.

'You must !' persisted Violet. 'Miss Bronson has another engagement, and you cannot possibly leave a timid, tender young creature like myself to enter a salon chaperonless and unprotected; besides, you want an opportunity to display your new coat.'

'That is an irresistible inducement—I'll go,' said the professor.

He knew that in all probability Aylmer would be there, and the prospect of a speedy

explanation of the mystery he had discovered —if Laurence could give any—was enough to dispose the savant to compliance with Violet's request.

Mary remained with the professor while the other two ladies went to Miss Bronson's room, the spinster at the last moment being undecided between the merits of a couple of head-dresses, and pathetically begging Violet's judgment thereupon.

'So you are working hard, my little girl,' said the professor when they were left alone. 'Too hard, I am afraid. You look somewhat tired.'

'I? Oh no——'

'None of that!' interrupted the savant, savagely. 'I'll send you a dose of the bitterest medicine ever concocted if you attempt to fib.'

'I never do, and you know it,' said Mary, who was warmly attached to the gruff old man.

'There's something wrong with both of you!' cried the professor. 'I ask no questions; I shall find out; you can't deceive me with your little feminine artifices.'

'We don't want to,' said Mary.

'H'm!' quoth the professor. 'Well, you

are impossible creatures, you women. Why in the deuce did you send Gilbert Warner away with a sore heart, I should like to know? I saw him at Verona—a pretty state of mind he was in! Not a word would he say—but I knew! Potztausend! The idea of nature arranging matters so that an absurd young insect like you has the power to sting the heart of a big, strong, noble fellow like that!'

Before Mary had time to answer, even had she possessed the power, Antonio entered in search of the coffee-tray, and directly after, Miss Cameron and Eliza returned.

'Miss Bronson will drop us at Lady Harcourt's on her way to Mrs. Mainwaring's,' said Violet, and destroyed a hope the professor had indulged that he might have an opportunity of asking her a few inquisitorial questions during the drive.

As the carriage rolled out of the court, Laurence Aylmer passed along the street and caught sight of Miss Cameron. He knew where she was going; he had received a note from Lady Harcourt, telling him that if he failed to come to her that night he need never expect forgiveness: promising that, as a reward for good behaviour, he should have

the happiness of hearing Miss Cameron sing —a favour she sometimes vouchsafed her intimate friends when they were *en petit comité.*

Having no mind to expose himself to unnecessary torture, Aylmer had decided not to go. He dined in his own rooms—or made a pretence of doing so—and until towards ten o'clock remained there alone, the prey of his bitter reflections. His solitude became unsupportable; he dressed hurriedly and left the house with the intention of going to Mrs. Mainwaring's. Why, to reach her residence, he took a route so roundabout as to pass through the piazza where the Amaldi Palace stood, was a question he refrained from asking until the sight of Miss Cameron's carriage suddenly roused him to fierce invectives against his own folly.

He could not get quickly enough away from the spot: he jumped into a cab and drove to the club, forgetting until he reached it that he had started from home meaning more hopelessly to addle his brains by spending an hour at his literary countrywoman's æsthetic conversazione. But it was no matter —the society he should find at the club would answer his purpose just as well. Anything,

anybody to take his thoughts away for a little from the persistent meditations of the last two days, was all he wanted.

As he got out of the cab, Alexis Sabakine came down the club-house steps and seized upon him at once.

'Where, in heaven's name, have you been hiding?' he asked. 'I have called on you twice—never in—Carlo away at Perugia—Landini ill. I was getting disgusted, and half inclined to cut Florence without delay. But you can't escape now. I promised to look in at Stanhope's rooms: after that will go to La Harcourt's, or anywhere you please.'

His *coupé* was waiting, and he fairly dragged Aylmer into it, talking so fast in his satisfaction at having found congenial companionship that Laurence had little to do but listen and reply in monosyllables.

As they entered Stanhope's salon, that gentleman appeared from an inner room, and before he dropped the curtain which hung over the doorway, the new-comers caught a glimpse of three men seated at a table playing cards.

'Hallo, Sabakine, I thought you'd forgotten your promise!' cried the Englishman,

in his loud, ringing voice. 'Why, Aylmer, is that you, or your ghost? Delighted to see you, old man! Sabakine, you hardened sinner——'

'I have received the papers; don't say I'm not punctual,' interrupted the Russian, taking an envelope from his pocket and laying it on the table.

'That's a good fellow!' returned the other. 'Just let me run my eye over them, and then I shall be ready to do the civil. You must both stop—we shall be just enough for a rubber, and leave Gherardi and you, Sabakine, to your favourite écarté.'

'Who else is in there?' asked the Russian, pointing towards the door of the second room.

'Pandolfini and Dimetri——'

'That fellow!' interrupted Sabakine, in a low tone, with a gesture of disgust. 'I wonder why we tolerate him.'

'Oh, I dare say he is no worse than the rest of us,' replied the easy-going Stanhope; and added in a louder tone: 'Aylmer, amuse yourself for a few minutes—there are weeds and bottles—while Sabakine explains these documents. Goodness knows when I may catch him again.'

Aylmer went to the farther end of the

salon, to be beyond earshot of their conversation. He was standing near the curtain, partially drawn back so that he could see into the other chamber—be seen perfectly also by the Greek ; for, though Dimetri had his back that way, a large mirror hung opposite his chair, and, as Aylmer looked, he saw their two images reflected therein. Dimetri had evidently just finished speaking; his companions held their cards in their hands and stared at him, but his fierce black eyes were fixed on the mirror.

'Pr-r-r, Dimetri, that is rather strong gossip, even for Florence!' exclaimed Gherardi.

'I'll wager what you please it will be more than gossip in less than a month,' returned the Greek, looking at Laurence Aylmer's reflection with an insulting smile.

'Come, come!' added Pandolfini. 'La belle Americaine is too wise-headed a woman for such nonsense ; it's too bad to talk of her in that way.'

'You are wonderfully scrupulous!' sneered Dimetri. 'I see no reason for being more chary of her reputation than of any other woman's! Since Violet Cameron has a married man for a lover——'

Before he could finish his sentence, Laurence

Aylmer flung the curtain back and dashed into the room. The Greek saw him coming, sprang out of his chair, and confronted him; but Aylmer was too quick. As Dimetri raised his hand, Laurence dealt him a blow full in the face, so sudden, so heavy, that he barely saved himself from falling by seizing hold of the table.

The other men started up with broken exclamations, and rushed between the two. The noise roused the pair in the outer salon, and they hurried in.

Aylmer stood still. The Greek wiped the blood from his mouth with his handkerchief, such triumphant satisfaction in the regard he fastened upon Laurence, that Sabakine, noticing it, decided at once that the insult, whatever it might be, which Aylmer had so promptly punished, had been premeditated, and the results exactly what Dimetri desired.

'Stanhope,' the Greek said composedly, 'with your permission I'll go into your bedroom and wash my face. Please come with me, Gherardi. I shall expect you to act for me. I suppose you will do me the favour?'

As Gherardi owed the fellow a large sum of money, he could not easily refuse. Indeed, whatever reports might be in circulation

against the Greek, his hold on respectability was strong enough to give him a right to demand from any acquaintance the service which the present exigency required.

The two passed out; the others gathered about Aylmer. There was very little to be said. Pandolfini gave a rapid explanation; Sabakine took Aylmer's hand, saying:

'I am your oldest friend here. You will not refuse me a friend's privilege?'

'I thank you,' Aylmer answered; then turned towards the host. 'I am very sorry any trouble should have happened here, Stanhope. I'll bid you good-night.'

'You need not be in the least sorry,' returned the other, bluntly. 'I hope you broke the rascal's jaw! As for going away, what's the use? Just stop till matters are arranged.'

They shook hands; then Sabakine drew Aylmer aside.

'The fellow will not eat his lie,' he said. 'To do him justice, he is no coward; you must meet him.'

'The sooner the better,' returned Laurence; 'to-morrow, if possible.'

Gherardi appeared in the doorway; Sabakine stepped forward, and said with grave courtesy:

'Mr. Aylmer has empowered me to act for him; I am quite at your service, monsieur.'

As the door closed behind them, Laurence began speaking of some indifferent matter, and the two gentlemen seconded him, though they were much less calm than he.

The conference in the adjoining room only lasted a short time; Gherardi came back, and Sabakine beckoned Aylmer out.

'It is all settled,' he said, 'to-morrow morning at sunrise in the Cascine. As I expected, the rascal would not hear of making an apology. Now let us bid these fellows good-night; you will be glad to get away, and so shall I.'

Hurried words had been exchanged between the trio, and the result of them was this speech from Stanhope when the two gentlemen returned.

'Aylmer,' he said, 'we wish to assure you that from neither of us will the cause of this difficulty be known.'

'Let me add,' said Gherardi, 'that before Signor Dimetri went away, it was distinctly understood that I only agreed to act for him on condition that he gave me his word to be equally reticent.'

'I owe you all my best thanks,' returned

Aylmer, made his adieus, and departed, accompanied by the Russian.

'I suppose it won't be long first——' began Pandolfini, but Stanhope checked him.

'Gherardi would not tell, and we do not want to know,' he said. 'Aylmer is a capital swordsman; I only hope he will kill the fellow.'

'H'm!' said Pandolfini, recalling various stories he had heard of the Greek's duelling prowess; every one of the histories credited him with having killed his man.

The Russian and Aylmer drove to the latter's lodgings; and Sabakine went in with him, and remained for half an hour.

'I'd stop longer if you wanted me,' he said, 'but I can see you would rather be alone.' He was pale and agitated, in spite of his attempt to appear composed. Aylmer had a singular faculty of winning the warm regard of those with whom he came much in contact, and he and the Russian had grown quite intimate. 'It is of no use to tell you how sorry I am,' continued Sabakine, rapidly; 'but it will all end well: not only are you a skilful fencer, but if there is any justice, a cause like yours must be successful.'

When Aylmer was left alone he sat down

at his writing-table: up to this moment he had literally felt nothing after the spasm of wrath which passed with the blow he had dealt the Greek upon his lying mouth.

Something told him now that for him the end of earthly things was at hand. No man could be less inclined to superstitious fancies, but this presentiment fastened itself upon his soul as firmly as if some supernatural power had taken visible shape and uttered it. Yet the certainty caused him no excitement; he wondered a little at his own dull calmness, as he might have done at that of a stranger. An uncontrollable longing to see Violet Cameron arose in his mind. Who could tell if the whole sweep of eternity would ever bring her within his reach after this night! He must see her; then he needed only to write the letters he desired to leave behind him, and all he had to do would be accomplished. He looked at his watch; it was still early enough to go to Lady Harcourt's. He should find her there; he could not die till he had gazed once more in the face of the woman whom he loved with an affection so deep that he knew even in the life beyond this it must remain the ruling power of his soul.

He paused before the glass, and adjusted his hair and dress; through the wild impatience which fired his veins, came the thought, how strange it seemed that he should never stand there again! He wondered anew at his own inability to care; then recollected that he was losing precious instants; she might be gone before he reached the house. He caught up his hat and outer coat, and rushed down the stairs, startling himself by the audible repetition of her name.

CHAPTER X.

FOR WHOM HE WAS TO DIE.

THE old professor's appearance with Miss Cameron created quite a sensation among the group seated in Lady Harcourt's salon.

'I am so glad to see you, Violet,' cried the hostess. 'Ursa Major, as I live! There is nobody who can bore us. I was determined to have a pleasant evening for once in my life. And how nice of you to have persuaded the Great Bear to come! Professor, I am delighted—overpowered—don't know how to express my gratitude!'

'I suppose a new species of beast is always a welcome addition to a menagerie,' retorted the professor, and kissed her hand as gallantly as if he had been an old beau.

'This really is too much!' laughed she. 'I shall expect a tender declaration presently.'

'The megalosaurus subjugated,' said the professor.

Violet left them to talk nonsense, and passed on to greet her friends—Nina and Carlo among them.

'We only got back just in time for dinner, else I should have gone to your house,' said the former.

'What has happened to you?' asked Violet. 'You look as radiant as if you had just returned from a honeymoon trip!'

'I'll tell you presently,' whispered Nina, and as soon as she could get her friend to herself for a few minutes, she unfolded her good news. 'Carlo has promised to play cards only once more for six months—so he will go to Giulia da Rimini's next evening, but that will be the last time.'

'I am so very, very glad!' returned Violet.

'And fancy Giulia's rage when she hears——'

'Madame la Duchesse da Rimini,' announced the French major-domo before Nina could finish, and she felt Violet's fingers close over her arm with a pressure which fairly hurt. She looked up in surprise. Miss Cameron had turned very pale, and her eyes were black with excitement. They were

standing near enough to hear what the newcomer said, as the hostess moved forward to greet her, with a surprise in her face which she took no pains to hide.

'My dear Lady Harcourt, I expected to find you alone—had no idea you meant to receive to-night—and I have just had news from Paris that I knew you would be glad to hear,' the duchess was saying, her usual slow grace not in the slightest degree disturbed.

'You are certain of always being *la bien venue* in my house,' returned her ladyship, 'and you shall tell me the news later.'

The duchess spoke to the people close by—caught sight of Violet and Nina, and approached them with stately ease.

'My darling Nina, what an unexpected pleasure!' she said, holding out her hand. 'Miss Cameron, I am delighted!'

She was about to extend the same greeting she had bestowed upon the marchesa, but, apparently unconscious of her intention, Violet bowed, and said:

'Madame la duchesse!'

She said only that; and though her lips wore a smile, there was an undisguised expression of scorn and menace in her eyes

which sent a thrill through the Sicilian's nerves, strong as they were.

At this instant Lady Harcourt hastened up.

'My dear Violet, you promised me a song,' she said; 'I shall not let you off. I mean to accompany you myself—if you are not grateful you are less than human.'

'I am quite at your service,' returned Violet.

As they walked away, Lady Harcourt whispered: 'It is too bad! I did not think even her assurance was equal to coming here to-night.'

'We have no one but ourselves to blame for the manner in which she ventures to treat us all,' Violet answered.

'Oh, I am ready to follow suit if anybody will take the initiative,' said Lady Harcourt.

'Only wait!' responded Violet, thinking of Carlo's promise to his wife—if he broke it, so much the worse. Even for Nina's sake she would keep no further terms with the duchess. Since the woman had forced herself on Lady Harcourt to-night, Carlo would have his opportunity, then he could find no excuse for going near Giulia.

'I am sorry, because I can't keep her and Carlo from high play, as you manage to do in

your house,' continued Lady Harcourt, 'and I know how it distresses you and Nina.'

'This evening, you need not be troubled on her account or mine,' said Violet; 'let them both alone.'

'You will tell me your reason some time? I am sure you mean mischief, and I am glad! If anybody can prove more than a match for Giulia, it will be you—but take care!'

A knot of men came up; Violet could only respond to the warning by a smile, but it was so bitter that Lady Harcourt fell to wondering what it meant.

'I have done more than my duty,' Miss Cameron said, as she finished her second song and was besieged for another. 'Lady Harcourt, you must play the harp for us—it was only on that condition I agreed to sing.'

'And I am ready to show myself a woman of my word,' replied her ladyship, gaily.

The last air Violet sang had been a favourite melody of Laurence Aylmer's. When Nina chose it, her first impulse was to refuse, then she felt indignant to find that anything associated with the man could move her.

After Lady Harcourt had played, two people seated themselves at the piano to

perform a duet. Violet left the music-room ; a suffocating sensation had oppressed her ever since she ended her song ; she wanted a breath of air, a few moments of solitude.

Lady Harcourt inhabited a villa in one of the modern quarters of the town. The ground-floor was occupied by a library, dining-room, a snuggery in which she usually spent her mornings, and attached thereto a large studio, for among her numerous talents and accomplishments she possessed no mean artistic ability.

As Miss Cameron reached the entrance-hall, the outer bell rang—the servant ushered some person in. She hurried on to escape companionship, crossed the library and gained the snuggery beyond, lighted only by candles placed so as to display a new painting to advantage ; the rest of the chamber lay in a soft gloom, very grateful to her tired eyes.

She sat down in an arm-chair, forgetting already the purpose which had brought her thither.

The heavy Persian curtains of the door rustled softly and were flung back. Violet glanced in that direction, and saw Laurence Aylmer.

She had believed that he would not come

to-night; of course they must unavoidably meet, but she persuaded herself that a little time would elapse before he gained audacity enough to accept invitations to houses where he ran the risk of encountering her.

As soon as she perceived the intruder, she turned away and appeared absorbed in contemplation of the picture. She heard him cross the room—knew that he was standing beside her—but she did not stir or take the slightest notice.

'Miss Cameron!' he said, after a brief silence. 'Miss Cameron!'

She looked round now, regarding him with icy surprise, as she might have done a stranger who ventured to address her under circumstances which rendered the act an impertinence.

'I saw you come in—I followed you,' he continued in a slow, difficult voice.

The surprise in her face deepened, her lips moved—seemed to repeat his words in wonder at his presumption—but emitted no sound.

'An hour ago I did not think anything would induce me to enter your presence,' he said, 'but I—I——'

He paused, and rested his hand heavily on a table which stood near her chair. He was

deathly pale, she could see; his eyes were hollow and ringed by dark circles which made them appear unnaturally large. But the recollection of the man's utter falsity checked Violet's quick impulse of sympathy, and the thought that he hoped still to deceive her increased the anger roused by her own weakness.

'I could not keep away,' he went on; 'it was stronger than my will—that impulse—so I came.'

She would waste neither resentment nor scorn; he deserved nothing but utter indifference, and should receive his lesson.

'Mr. Aylmer,' she said, 'when we meet in the society of mutual acquaintances I may recognise you in order to avoid remark; under other circumstances we remain strangers. You will, of course, be courteous enough never to force me to repeat this declaration.'

'You will have no necessity,' he answered, his lips quivering with a troubled smile.

She slightly bowed her head; the movement was not only an acquiescence but a gesture of dismissal, and again her eyes went back to the picture.

After a pause he spoke again.

'Since I promise you that——'

'Promises are uncalled for between strangers,' she interrupted; and now she waved her hand towards the door.

He did not move.

She waited for a few seconds—her hand still extended — but he kept his position. Then she rose without deigning him a second glance.

'Don't go!' he exclaimed.

She walked on—he stepped quickly before her, repeating:

'Don't go!'

'I will not, if your leaving me prevents the necessity,' she answered.

'In a few moments. Give me a little time!' he said.

Again she attempted to pass; he put out his arm; he was so close that he would have touched her if she had not retreated a step. Such disdainful haughtiness suddenly steeled her face, that a person seeing it for the first time would not have believed the countenance could ever wear a gentle expression.

'Not even the outward courtesy of a conventional gentleman,' she said slowly; 'ah well! I need not be surprised.'

'You must let me speak,' he hurried on,

regardless of her contempt. 'Yes, I think I am desperate enough to stop you, if you refuse.'

Violet returned to her chair and sat down.

'Since to call for assistance would be absurd, I must admit myself a prisoner,' she said.

'It is only this! I have not come to ask your pardon — to explain. The friendship which will not stand any and every test is not worth possessing.'

A painful constriction in his throat made him pause; Violet sat stone-deaf to his voice, blind to his presence—her eyes fixed on the picture, her features as unchangeable as if they had frozen with that intolerable scorn upon them.

'You are too proud!' he cried, with an indescribable peevish pathos in his tone. 'Take care—God punishes pride! Remember what I say, for we shall never meet again!'

Never again—and he must go into the next world and take with him the recollection of her face as it looked now! Oh, if he could only find means to soften it for an instant—just one!

'Violet! Violet!' he called, in an uncontrollable paroxysm of agony that thrilled her very soul.

'What do you want?' she asked, forced to look at him, forced to speak, in spite of her will.

She could hear her voice tremble, knew that her face had lost its mask, but for a moment she could not resist his sway.

'Ah!' he cried, in a tone of wild exultation, 'at least I shall carry this memory with me—at least this! Only a minute more, then you may go—it is for ever, for ever! Remember always that in thought, word, and deed I have been true to the deity I set up in my soul—remember! I loved you—I shall love you still—death itself could not alter that!'

Violet uttered a little gasping cry—put out her hands as if a positive physical insult had been offered her—tried to rise, but sank back so sick and faint with anger and disgust that she was powerless.

'You know it,' he continued. 'However much you loathe me now, you know it—you will remember — remember it more and more!'

'Is the play ended?' she asked, finding voice at length. 'Oh, I thank you after all—I did not dream when you stopped me here in that ruffianly fashion that I should have cause

—but I thank you. I might have grieved somewhat for the man I had believed you—for the friend I had lost. I might have tried perhaps to make for you the excuses that many women hold good where men are concerned; you have destroyed the possibility—you have shown me you are so vile, there is no room for regret. I thank you.'

'I love you,' he repeated.

The repetition of the words which seemed so terrible an outrage, roused her to wrath such as she had never felt in her whole life.

'Oh, now I understand everything!' she exclaimed. 'And you really fancied me weak enough even yet to be deceived by your arts? Trust me, sir, you have failed in every way. Do not flatter yourself that the girlish heart you tried, two nights ago, to fill with the story of your affection, hoping thus to close her lips, was touched: my cousin despises you as heartily as a pure creature can a man like you.'

'Your cousin!' he echoed.

'Oh, if you needed money so sorely, I'd have given you half my fortune, if you had only invented some reason for wanting it, rather than bear the shame of remembering that I ever called so base a pretender my friend!'

He stood perfectly impassive under her fiery tirade, his eyes, so full of yearning anguish, fastened upon her.

'I never thought of that,' he said slowly. 'Surely I might have supposed other people would recollect your money; I did not; I wouldn't have believed you could even now. No, no; I had no need of it—less than ever now. I am rich again; but it is all no matter.'

'None,' she said, 'none! Is my imprisonment ended—can I go without risk of new insolence?'

'I said the whole in saying: I love you,' he answered, moving aside. 'God bless you, Violet! remember they were my last words. God bless you—farewell!'

She was gone. He stood still for a few seconds, trying to catch the echo of her tread; then he turned towards the chair in which he had sat—stooped and kissed the carved arms over which her hands had clenched themselves, warm still from that nervous pressure.

'The woman I am going to die for,' he said half aloud: 'surely I have a right to love her. If she should ever learn the truth and be sorry, I wonder if they would let me come back and tell her not to grieve—I wonder.'

Once more he kissed the polished wood, and left the room in his turn. The servants had deserted the entrance-hall. He found his hat and coat, opened the door, and passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XI.

ONCE TOO OFTEN.

Violet dared not immediately return to the company; she must have a few moments to subdue the excitement which shook her, body and mind, caused by so many varying emotions that she could not have told what feeling was uppermost.

She ascended the stairs and passed through the ante-chamber where the ladies had left their wraps—empty now, luckily. She walked to and fro—paused before a vase of flowers, and began counting the roses—the silk balls that decorated the table-fringe—trying to concentrate her faculties upon some trivial employment, till the pulses which beat like tiny hammers in either temple should relax their force enough to let her see and hear clearly, for the physical sensation was as if a

sudden blow had first stunned, and then fevered her brain.

At length she heard a step. The thought of being seen nerved her. She turned to the door—met Lady Harcourt's maid—stopped to ask the woman kindly if she were entirely recovered from an illness she had had—glanced at herself in a mirror, and went on, satisfied that beyond an unusual pallor and an odd strained look in her eyes, there was nothing peculiar in her appearance, and the people would all be too full of themselves to notice such slight signs of agitation.

From the farther salon still came the sounds of the piano. Violet wanted no more music, and walked in the opposite direction—found herself surrounded by a knot of gentlemen—talked—was talked to—all the while feeling as if she were in a dream—a dream which held vague horrors that chilled her blood. Somebody said something about play going on in the card-room ; she heard herself saying she wanted to watch the game. Somebody offered his arm—she took it, and was led away.

A party of whist-players occupied one of the tables ; farther on, she saw the duchess and Carlo absorbed in *écarté ;* near them,

Lady Harcourt and Nina, with a knot of men hovering about. The hostess called Violet, and made her sit on the sofa between the marchesa and herself.

That mercurial personage was in her most brilliant mood, pouring out *bon mots,* relating amusing anecdotes, and generally riveting attention upon herself, so that Nina had an opportunity to whisper to Violet :

'Do you see Giulia ? I never saw her look so utterly fiendish as she does to-night, and she has been so sweet and insolent to me—oh, I wish the game was over !'

'Patience !' returned Violet. 'It is the last time.'

She had a sudden odd sensation as she spoke that her words meant more than she herself comprehended—knew that she must have uttered them oddly too, for Nina was quite staring at her with wide-open eyes.

'What do you mean ?' the marchesa asked.

'Since Carlo promised you not to play after this evening for six whole months,' said Violet.

'Oh !' exclaimed Nina, in a disappointed tone. 'You said it in such a strange way—I hoped I don't know what—goose that I am !'

And now Violet found a plan which rendered the words she had spoken significant

enough. This should be the last time that the duchess tempted Carlo through his peculiar weakness. If there was no other way to prevent it, she would tell the woman in plain language that the secret shared by herself and cousin would only remain a secret on those conditions. She could frighten the creature. She, Violet Cameron, was a power in the social world which even Giulia would not venture to defy. What an idiot not to have thought of this before! At least some good might come out of that miserable man's treachery—good to her friend, whoever else suffered.

'Aren't you well? I think you are pale, or is it this light?' Nina was saying.

'It is your fancy,' returned Violet.

'I am tired—I wish I was at home!' continued Nina. 'I wonder why Laurence Aylmer is not here. You have seen him, of course, since I went away?'

Lady Harcourt relieved Violet from the necessity of replying.

'Nina, stop whispering in Violet Cameron's pretty ear and listen to my story!' she cried. 'It is a new tale, and I want to rehearse it to a small and discriminating audience.'

They were all still laughing at the absurd

history, when the duchess flung down her cards and said aloud :

'What amuses you so much over yonder? If you held such hands as mine, you would not laugh so heartily.'

'Not in vein to-night, Giulia?' asked Lady Harcourt.

'No,' replied the duchess, rising as she spoke. 'The marchese and I want to play *baccarat : écarté* is too stupid—too—what is that expressive English word, Miss Cameron? —ah, *slow.*'

'The very word,' replied Violet.

'What wonderful progress you are making in our harsh tongue!' laughed Lady Harcourt.

'Ah, when one has a good teacher!' said Carlo.

'Go you, marchese, and bring some Christian souls who appreciate *baccarat,* and leave me and my teachers alone,' retorted the duchess, with a sneer.

'Wouldn't disturb you for the world—not even when you put them in the plural,' said Carlo. '*Baccarat,* eh? Well, since this is my last chance for six months, I may as well take advantage of it.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'I am not to touch a card for six whole months,' said Carlo.

Everybody laughed except Nina and Violet, but Magnoletti persisted, till all perceived that he was in earnest.

'Whom did you promise?' asked the duchess, as the chorus of wondering ejaculations ceased.

'I swore it on my guardian angel's crucifix,' replied Carlo, gaily.

'Upon my word, Miss Cameron, we may well call you the all-powerful!' cried the duchess.

Violet did not heed the speech, so no one would have ventured to notice it, only Carlo knew that it would enrage the duchess more to discover he had yielded to his own wife's influence than to that of Miss Cameron.

'The crucifix happened to be Russian,' said he, and as he spoke he playfully raised Nina's hand to his lips.

The duchess laughed in reply, and turned to take her fan from the table, but Violet caught sight of her face—its expression of malignity was positively startling—and Miss Cameron exulted anew over the power which she possessed to counteract the plots she felt assured the woman already meditated.

The duchess looked round with her sweetest smile, and said :

'It would be a pity to endanger your wise resolves, Carlo—there shall be no *baccarat !* Let us rest a little, and go back to *écarté :* I believe I shall follow your good example so far as to abjure all other games.'

'To think of my brightening into a shining light to guide people into safe paths !' cried Carlo.

'This is a world of surprises,' returned the duchess, glancing at Miss Cameron with an expression lost upon that lady, though the marchese perfectly understood its meaning, and he inwardly vowed to tell Nina, before he slept, of the malicious hints Giulia had several times thrown out in regard to himself and their friend.

Her last chance—this had been the duchess's thought when Carlo announced his determination to give up cards—she would make good use of it ! Oh, if Dimetri were only there ! There might be danger for her in attempting to cheat at *baccarat* unaided, but at *écarté* she could do it with impunity in case fortune favoured Magnoletti : before they rose from the table the thousands which remained from Carlo's late inheritance should change hands !

Giula and Carlo stood watching the whist-players: the others joined the people in the outer salons—Violet pausing to whisper some hopeful assurance in Nina's ear as they went.

'Am I expected to wait for you, Fräulein?' asked the professor, stalking up to Miss Cameron.

'Of course you are,' said Lady Harcourt, who overheard the question, 'and she is not going for these two hours! You dreadful man, you drove us out of the music-room by persuading Madame de Hatsfeldt to play that terrible Wagner music! But you cannot escape: come and tell me all sorts of wise things, so that I can repeat them later as original, and get a reputation for learning on easy terms.'

Violet would gladly have gone home, but she knew that her hostess would not permit her to leave, and besides, weary as she was, something impelled her to remain, and she could not resist the conviction that before the evening ended she should learn the reason—find it a potent one too.

Presently, other men were announced—Sabakine and Gherardi amongst them. Nearly another hour passed, then the supper-room was thrown open.

'Sabakine,' said Lady Harcourt, 'play *maître d'hôtel* and go warn those people in the other room that eatables and champagne are to be had if they choose to leave their cards.'

When he came back, Lady Harcourt and Violet were still in the salon, detained by a diatribe of the professor's against the madness of human creatures exasperating their interiors by eating trash at that hour of the night.

'None of them can think of their stomachs,' said Sabakine. 'Gherardi has persuaded the whist-players to change to poker! The duchess wants a lemonade.' Then he added in Violet's ear: 'Carlo is losing fearfully! Dear Miss Cameron—perhaps I ought not to say it—but try to stop his playing so much with the duchess. If she were a man I would tell you the reason.'

Violet knew that he shared her suspicions, but nothing could be done at present; she took his arm and followed Lady Harcourt, who was not only forcing the professor into the supper-room, but threatening to make him devour both game and sweets as a punishment for his lecture.

Violet could not eat; her throat felt parched and burning, and she took an ice in order to obtain momentary relief.

'I will have no standing about—no nibbling,' Lady Harcourt announced; 'you are all to sit down at table like Christians, and not only eat, but be as witty as if we were back in the days of the gay, delightful Philippe, instead of this dull nineteenth century.'

It seemed to Violet that the party would never break up; she could endure it no longer; she must go back to the card-room—she must!

'Do come,' she whispered at last to the professor, who was seated beside her.

'Where are you going?' called Lady Harcourt. 'I'll not have you ruin a pleasant hour, Violet.'

'I'll come back,' she replied; 'my head aches. The professor is too devoted to you—I am jealous, and must have him to myself for a few minutes.'

The savant gave her his arm, and they strayed into the empty salon beyond.

'What ails you, Fräulein?' he asked. 'I knew at dinner that something was wrong.'

'I am anxious about the marchese,' she answered. 'Professor, that woman's look haunts me;' and she told rapidly of Carlo's promise to abstain from cards. 'If she could ruin him she would—she is desperate.'

'You can't do any good,' returned the

professor; 'the marchese is crazy when he gets those devil's pictures in his hands.'

'I believe she cheats; I believe the whispers are true——'

'Never take the trouble to believe anything which you cannot prove,' interrupted the professor, calmly. 'My dear, it is distracting to think of the variety of reptiles and wild beasts the life-principle in that woman must have passed through before it entered her present shape.'

'Come with me,' pleaded Violet. 'Perhaps I can give him a warning; sometimes he will pay attention to what I say.'

The professor shrugged his broad shoulders. 'If this is Carlo's last chance for six months, warnings will be thrown away,' said he; 'but come, Fräulein, and don't look so miserable.'

'And watch her—do!' urged Violet. 'Your eyes are as quick as those of a lynx; who knows——'

In her impatience she hurried him forward without waiting to finish her sentence. The professor paused in the doorway, and let her pass.

The table at which the four men sat was at the farther end of the room; the players too deeply engrossed to notice anything that went

on about them. Carlo and the duchess were seated so that the professor could look directly into the lady's hand; her back towards him. She was shuffling the cards—relating some anecdote while thus employed; Carlo laughing at her words. He was pale, but scarcely more so than usual; a few tiny beads of perspiration which broke out on his forehead afresh each time that he wiped them away, alone betrayed his keen excitement.

Violet passed round the table and leaned over him. 'What luck?' she whispered.

'Not precisely brilliant,' he replied carelessly, 'but perhaps it will change.'

The duchess looked up; Miss Cameron was regarding her fixedly, but though the woman perfectly understood the meaning in her glance, she returned it with a scornfully indifferent smile.

'So!' said Violet, half aloud, and made a rapid sign with her fan, first towards her own head, then towards Carlo's shoulder. Giulia attempted to look defiant, but her gaze wavered; she shut her mouth hard to hide a sudden quiver of the lips.

'Did you speak, belle Violette?' asked Carlo.

'The other night at my house,' began

Violet softly, her eyes still fastened on the woman, 'the other night——'

'Marchese, suppose we stop,' broke in the duchess, quickly. 'Ah, pardon, I interrupted Miss Cameron!'

'Well, the other night?' questioned Carlo.

'You were less unlucky,' said Violet.

'No high play permitted,' rejoined he, laughing. 'Did you say stop, duchess? Heavens, what an idea! This is my last dissipation for six months, remember!'

The duchess gave Violet a quick glance, which said as plainly as words could have done: 'I am not to blame,' and began dealing the cards. 'You would go on playing if I retired, Carlo, so I may as well take my chances,' she observed presently.

Violet turned away; as she did so she saw the duchess's eyes follow her—that awful glare was in their depths again; her lips wreathed with the malignant smile which had startled Violet once before. For the moment, Miss Cameron could do no more—the woman had won the right to a truce. Violet sat down at some distance from the table; the professor kept his stand. The game continued; Carlo's losses were terrible. The duchess was dealing again; her brain

working busily. If she could put Magnoletti so much in her debt that, added to his previous losses at her house, the present disaster would cramp him in a desperate manner, she could buy Violet's silence by proposing easy terms of payment to Carlo. Not only a hold gained on Miss Cameron, but the money—the money which she loved in the very depths of her soul, where the instincts of a usurer and a spendthrift fought incessantly for supremacy.

'I am tired, marchese,' she said. 'What say you—double or quits?'

Carlo snatched at the chance with the recklessness of the true gambler.

'As you like,' he answered.

Whatever else he might know her capable of, Magnoletti had never suspected her of cheating; while she dealt, he turned his head and addressed some trivial remark to Miss Cameron.

With an expertness worthy a conjurer, the duchess slipped a king from the bottom of the pack, instead of throwing down the top card. Victory in every way; not only Carlo's money won, but Violet Cameron conquered a second time—victory!

Quick as her movement was, before she could play the king, a grip of iron seized her

two hands just across the knuckles, and shut them so tight that she could not drop the evidence of her guilt—could not stir a finger.

Discovered—ruined!

The terrible consequences flashed upon the woman and paralysed body and mind. She groaned aloud. Carlo looked back, and uttered an exclamation of horror. The men at the other table started from their seats, and hurried forward. The professor cried:

'Look for yourselves, gentlemen. The trick has been neatly done.'

He lifted the duchess's hands so that the spectators could see all the cards—the position of the tell-tale thumb and finger. Nobody spoke—the whole group was absolutely struck dumb. Then the professor's guttural voice broke the silence:

'Perhaps you do not punish lady-sharpers publicly, but at least I suppose you decline to play with them.'

Violet sat motionless—her first thought one of rejoicing that Carlo was saved; then she caught sight of the criminal's white face, and a shudder of pity mingled with her fright and disgust.

The professor held the woman fast; she did not attempt to struggle; her black eyes wan-

dered slowly about the circle, then settled on Violet Cameron, and a fierce, impotent wrath mingled with the terror that glazed their fires.

At the instant, Lady Harcourt and Nina appeared on the threshold. Nina was looking back over her shoulder at Sabakine: her merry laugh rang out, sending a cold thrill through the listeners—died abruptly on her lips as a low ejaculation from her companion caused her to turn her head.

Lady Harcourt mechanically stepped forward, drawing the marchesa with her. Sabakine followed, closing the door behind him. He had taken in the full significance of the scene at a glance.

'At last,' he said calmly.

'At last,' echoed the professor. 'She cheated you out of ten thousand francs about a month since, Sabakine.'

'I thought no one knew it, so I held my peace,' returned the Russian; 'but I was sure this must happen sooner or later.'

'I saw the trick the night she tried it with you,' rejoined the professor. 'I was not quick enough then to catch her; we have been more successful this time—everybody has seen.'

He dropped the woman's hands—the cards

rustled slowly to the floor. She cowered down in her chair, sat quiet for a moment, then struggled to her feet. They could hear her panting breath; her lips were drawn back spasmodically, showing the white teeth; her eyes again wandered about the group.

'What do you mean to do?' she hissed; and her gaze once more settled on Violet. 'That Cameron woman is satisfied now. Well, what do you mean to do?'

'I am sure that I can speak for everybody here—no one will tell!' cried Carlo.

'Provided the duchess promises to leave Florence for two years,' added Sabakine, in his most indifferent tones.

The other men did not speak. They were all Italians, and had often suffered from what they had considered Giulia's wonderful luck; to know that their losses had no doubt been caused by trickery, filled them with anger too hot for any merciful recollection of her sex to soften their judgment.

The duchess uttered an inarticulate cry of rage—started forward—made a step towards Violet. Her arms were stretched out; her face so perfectly demoniac that Nina shrieked. Sabakine moved in front of the woman; the professor's hand fell heavily upon her shoulder.

The duchess's frenzied eyes roved from Violet to Carlo; she laughed aloud. At least she could deal one final blow, defeated, disgraced as she was.

She began to utter the vile slander which the Greek had spoken, but the professor stopped her at the first words, which reached no ears save his and Sabakine's.

'If you finish, madame,' he exclaimed, 'I will expose you myself in the morning papers.'

'Good God, professor!' cried Carlo.

'Hush!' said Sabakine, sternly. 'If the professor did not, I would; mercy is wasted here.'

The duchess's fingers tore like claws at the lace upon her dress, but she remained silent.

Lady Harcourt had by this time recovered her presence of mind. She crossed the salon and opened a door hidden in the oak wainscoting.

'That passage leads directly to the dressing-room,' she said. 'Madame da Rimini can leave my house without encountering those guests who have not witnessed this scene.'

The woman turned, shook her clenched hand at Violet Cameron, uttered another in-

articulate cry like the snarl of a wild animal, and fled, closing the door behind her.

She gained the dressing-room, found her wraps, and hurried downstairs. Her carriage drove up, and as she was entering it a hand touched hers.

'Permit me, duchess!' said Dimetri, softly. 'I was waiting till you came out; I had something to tell you.'

'What?' she demanded, turning fiercely on him.

'Do you remember what you said to-day? Well—to-morrow morning at daylight!'

She grasped his arm with both hands and began to laugh.

'Get into the carriage,' she whispered, as soon as she could check that terrible paroxysm of laughter. 'Tell me about it! You are sure to kill him—sure!'

'I was Lachasse's favourite pupil,' he answered, with a smile.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORY TOLD.

For a few instants after the door closed behind the woman, nobody among the group stirred or spoke. Nina had caught her husband's hand and held it fast; Lady Harcourt leaned on Violet's shoulder to support herself; the men stood like statues of astonishment, with the exception of Sabakine and the professor; the Russian was calmly adjusting a flower in his button-hole, and the savant regarding the party with a smile worthy a sphinx.

'Professor,' said Sabakine, breaking the silence with his cold, polished voice, 'they all seem turned to stone: can't you perform some sort of incantation that will restore their vitality?'

The professor pointed a long, bony finger at the table strewn with cards, and replied sententiously:

'They have banished the devil, but they'll not give up his works.'

Everybody started, and a chorus of ejaculations rose.

Violet sat down on the sofa near, and Nina hurried up, drawing Carlo with her.

'And only last week she took a cool three thousand out of my pocket at piquet!' exclaimed Gherardi. 'Carlo mio, set up a statue of Fortune at once in your oratory, and let it wear the professor's face.'

'I should make a beautiful goddess, but it would be a pity to leave out my legs,' quoth the savant.

Lady Harcourt laughed hysterically.

'I could forgive Giulia her dishonesty,' said she, 'but I can't pardon her bad taste in choosing my house to display it.'

'And we always talked about her wonderful luck,' cried Gherardi. 'By heavens, we ought to publish her in every newspaper in Italy!' and all his compatriots, with the exception of Magnoletti, echoed his angry threat.

'Oh no, no!' exclaimed Violet. 'Keep her secret—she will go away at once! Nina—Lady Harcourt—make them promise not to tell.'

'Of course they'll not tell—we shan't, any of us; yet it will leak out somehow,' returned her ladyship philosophically, rather annoyed with herself for having been betrayed into either surprise or horror even by an incident so startling. 'In the meantime, Sabakine, open the doors; what will the other people think to find us shut up like so many conspirators?'

'In an *opéra bouffe*,' added Carlo, speaking for the first time since the duchess's departure.

Nina laughed, then put up her fan to hide the tears which rushed to her eyes.

'Happy tears,' she whispered, as Violet pressed her hand in silent sympathy. 'There never was but one real cloud on my horizon —it is gone for ever.'

'A great deal to be thankful for,' Violet thought; then that mournful line of the great master's flashed through her mind: 'It is hard to look at happiness through other men's eyes!' There came another reflection: If she had wronged Laurence Aylmer after all! But no; even though she could believe that the duchess had put him in an equivocal position without fault on his part, his words this night damned him with deeper

treachery! Only two evenings before he had poured forth tender declarations to Mary Danvers, in the hope of securing her silence —to-night he had dared to tell her, Violet, that she alone reigned in his heart.

'I must go home,' she said, rising quickly.

'Oh, not yet!' urged Lady Harcourt, overhearing the words.

'And I too,' added Nina; 'come, Carlo, I am so tired.'

'Civil to your hostess,' retorted her ladyship. 'I believe I am tired too—there's a return compliment.'

As Nina passed the professor, she stopped short.

'I should like to kiss you!' cried she, laughing, yet ready to cry.

'You may,' said he.

'I will,' she replied, and stood on tiptoe to do it, as he bent his grizzly head towards her with comic gravity.

'Now do you know it really is not unpleasant,' said the professor, looking about in a meditative fashion, whereat they all laughed immoderately.

'Impossible to decide, except by a personal trial,' said Sabakine.

'Come home, small woman!' cried Carlo.

'I can't fight a duel with every man in the room on your account.'

The word duel carried Sabakine's thoughts back to the subject he had tried to forget. He was ready now also to take his leave.

The other guests came trooping out of the supper-room, and met the party on their way through the salons.

'Going already?' cried somebody.

'I provide board, but not beds,' said Lady Harcourt. 'Go home, everybody. I am a lone widow, with only my reputation as a shield against a sinful world. You need not look wicked, Sabakine. I don't want to lose my character, bad as it is: you might discover my real one, and then I should be worse off than I am now.'

'You would alway be the pearl of women, whatever *rôle* you assumed,' said the Russian, bowing over her extended fingers.

'My dear, I am forty years past compliments,' returned she, tapping his cheek with a hand white and shapely as in the days when she reigned supreme by her beauty, nor had she lost her sovereignty even at sixty-five—her cleverness and wit took the place of youthful charms.

'I shall come and see you to-morrow,

Violet,' said Nina, as they descended the stairs.

'Who has seen Laurence Aylmer to-day?' demanded Carlo.

'Yes, Nina, come to-morrow,' said Violet.

'To-morrow!' mentally repeated Sabakine, on whose arm Miss Cameron was leaning. 'God knows what that may bring her,' for the reticent, secretive Russian had obtained a clearer insight to Violet's feelings than most of her acquaintances.

Her carriage had come for her after taking Miss Bronson home, and the professor declared that as he brought her, he ought to return with her, meaning to take this opportunity of discovering if his fears that trouble had arisen between her and his favourite, possessed any foundation. But Violet did not want to be alone with him—she was afraid he might speak of the man, so she jestingly quoted Lady Harcourt's speech:

'And I am not even anybody's widow, poor lone spinster that I am!' she added.

'Would you like to be mine?' asked Sabakine.

'Alas, crape is not becoming to me,' she replied; and as their glances met, each perceived that for some reason the other found

jesting difficult, so Sabakine naturally hurried Violet on, and put her in the carriage.

'At least, always remember that you can rank me among the truest of your friends,' he said, with sudden gravity. 'Good-night, Miss Cameron—sleep well.'

'*Sans adieu*,' she answered; 'we are certain to meet to-morrow.'

Ah, what that morrow might bring her! was his thought, as he got into his *coupé* and drove away.

Clarice had been suffering from neuralgia in her face during the last two days, and Miss Cameron had bidden her go to bed early and get a thorough rest. Violet, determined not to be beguiled into reverie, began to undress as soon as she entered her room, and had nearly finished the operation when she fancied that she heard a sound from Mary's chamber.

Very possibly the poor child, unable to sleep, was sitting in solitary communion with her troubled heart; and in spite of her own sufferings, of the fact that the peculiar circumstances rendered it very hard that the task of consoling Mary should fall upon her, she was too unselfish to think of seeking her pillow without having at least tried, by affectionate caresses, to remind the girl that she

was not deserted and uncared for in her pain.

Miss Cameron opened the door softly, so as not to disturb her cousin in case she slept, and looked into the chamber. Her fancy had not deceived her; May sat by the window, from which she had pushed back the shutter, and was gazing out at the starlit sky, so absorbed in her reverie that she did not notice Violet's entrance.

Miss Cameron would have marvelled could she have known how quickly these solitary hours had passed with the young watcher. The words which the professor spoke to her after dinner sent Mary away to her room with every pulse beating high in relief and hope.

The professor was not a man to have said so much as he had without a warrant beyond his own fancies or intuitions—nothing but assurances from Warner's own lips would have induced him to speak.

The last cloud was gone; even the fear that a long dreary period of waiting, of misapprehension, might spread between them, and embitter this separation, faded in its turn.

She was no longer bound by the scruples

which had rendered it impossible for her to make any sign—all the circumstances of the case were changed. She could answer his letter now without fear of appearing forward or unmaidenly ; nay, to pass it by unnoticed would be unfriendly—uncourteous even, since she owed him her thanks for the beautiful sketches he had so kindly remembered amid the hurry of preparations for his journey.

She read over and over his farewell note—read too, divers little billets which on one pretext or another he had managed to write her. They all told the same story—she could decipher it clearly enough now. Of course it was natural and fitting that without delay she should forward a few kind, frank lines, telling him how sorry all his acquaintances were at his unexpected departure—how warmly they hoped soon to welcome him back—and he might believe that no one would be more glad to do so than his sincere friend Mary Danvers.

She must have spent two good hours meditating that epistle, brief as she proposed to make it, but she had it clearly arranged in her mind at last. She heard Violet return, and meant to go to bed so quietly that her cousin would not suspect her late watch, but

some new fancy carried her off on its sunny wings, and she forgot her resolve.

'You bad child, to be up at this hour!' called Violet.

Mary started, and said rather confusedly:

'You—you have got back! Is it so very late?'

'Past two o'clock,' returned Miss Cameron.

'It is you who ought to be in bed—how tired your voice sounds!' said Mary.

'Does it? I believe I am tired,' replied Violet. 'What have you been doing all the evening?'

'Oh, reading, a part of the time,' Mary explained, and felt her cheeks grow hot.

'What?' asked Violet, at once fulfilling Mary's fear that the confession would place her in the difficulty of having to answer this question; but, as usual, that over-scrupulous conscience of hers would never permit her to indulge in the slightest prevarication.

'Only letters,' she said, and the slight quiver in her voice roused a new suspicion in Violet's mind. Aylmer had been in the habit of secretly writing to her; it was his letters the poor child had been torturing her wounded heart by perusing; each tender word now becoming only a fresh confirmation of his falsity.

Better that Mary should have every additional proof possible without delay of the man's utter worthlessness. She was too sensible, too proud, to mourn long for so mean a deceiver, and so young, Violet again reflected with a bitter pang, that the loss of this affection need not make an arid desert of her life, encumbered by the ruined altars of a shattered faith.

'Mary,' she said quickly, 'you asked me the other night what I meant to do—you know what I mean—that night when——'

'Yes, yes!' Mary interrupted, her heart giving a great throb of sympathy for her cousin. 'And—and you have decided?'

'I have decided,' Violet answered; 'I have acted on my resolution.'

'Oh!' Mary gasped. For the moment she could not add a syllable, afraid of betraying some consciousness which would lacerate Violet's pride beyond the power of healing.

'I must tell you,' Violet went on, sitting wearily down in a chair. 'It is better you should know the whole.'

She paused, and her listener wondered if it were possible that she was so utterly beaten down and conquered that she must have sympathy in her woe. Mary rose suddenly;

her first impulse was to fling her arms about Violet, and assure her that at least one heart would never fail her. But even yet she did not dare go so far; she must wait till her cousin proved by absolute words that she was humbled enough, so that such protestations could comfort instead of wounding her.

Mary crossed the room, seated herself on a stool, resting her head on Violet's knee, after a habit she had taken when they talked confidentially.

'Tell me,' she said softly; 'you know you can!'

'Yes,' Violet replied, smoothing her hair; 'you are such a brave girl; such a heart of gold! Mary, I can't soften the blow; I must tell it all out. I have seen him to-night——'

'Oh!' Mary gasped again. 'And it was of no use? He had nothing to say! How could he! Yet I had hoped—yes, I had——'

She could not finish. Violet put out her arm and drew her closer—sorrow for the girl's suffering—a strange bitterness against fate that the task of reporting Aylmer's despicable conduct should fall upon her of all people in the world, that consolation for the youthful heart he had injured should be her portion—hers whose hurt was so much deeper, so

much more fatal—making confusion in her mind, above which presently another thought dominated; to pause now would be as cruel as for a surgeon to hesitate after his knife had probed his patient's wound.

'There is no hope,' she said, 'none! Mary, we must make up our minds to that. See, he could think of no other way of adding to the fulness of his infamy, so to-night he actually told me that he—he loved me!'

'Violet!' Mary exclaimed.

'Yes, I know,' Miss Cameron hurried on; 'it seems incredible that his audacity could go so far, but it did! There, you have heard the worst now! He wanted my money, perhaps; else believed that my vanity was so inordinate he could actually by a declaration of his love—his love—make me believe him blameless where that woman was concerned; his treachery to you a mere amusement on his part, which he had not dreamed you would take seriously——'

Mary interrupted by pushing away her arm and sitting upright, staring into her cousin's face with wide-opened eyes.

'Treachery to me?' she repeated. 'To me?'

'Don't be hurt at my knowing; trust me,

dear!' cried Violet, putting out her arms again, and folding the girl to her bosom, adding with a sudden burst of impatience against fate, life, all things: 'Oh, Mary, Mary, why couldn't you have cared for the good man who loved you—at least have set one matter straight in this wicked world!'

Mary struggled to free herself, exclaiming passionately: 'Let me go, let me go!' As Violet released her, she rose and stood looking at her in wonder. 'What do you mean?' she cried. 'Laurence Aylmer treacherous to me? Why, Violet, you are mad, or I am! In heaven's name, what do you mean?'

Did the child hope even yet to deny the secret which her broken words and agitation would have revealed without the other proofs which Violet possessed? If so, she must humour her; but how to go on and not betray her knowledge was a task so difficult that for a little she sat speechless.

'You think I care for Mr. Aylmer?' demanded Mary, with that passionate wonder growing stronger in her voice. 'You believe that—that——'

'I am thankful that at least his arts did not succeed,' Violet said hurriedly, as she

paused. 'I could not tell. You are very young. Many girls would have been touched —he could seem so earnest, so true!'

'Violet, stop!' cried Mary. 'You certainly will drive me out of my senses! Answer my question—I insist! You think Laurence Aylmer flirted with me?'

'Yes. Ah, don't be vexed, Mary; don't think I am curious, intrusive. I love you, dear! See, I will believe what you tell me about your own feelings——'

'Oh, if you don't stop I shall become a gibbering idiot!' burst in Mary, so excited by the sudden light thrown upon matters that she scarcely knew what she said, in her eagerness to enlighten her cousin. 'He was like a brother to me—never a word or look that was not kindness itself—that, and nothing more!'

'Mary! Mary!'

'I swear it, Violet! Oh, do believe me!

'I think one of us must be mad!' Violet exclaimed, so worn out that for the instant a kind of fretful exasperation was uppermost in her bewildered faculties.

'Oh, we must make everything clear now,' returned Mary. 'I tell you I never thought

of him except as a friend. He never dreamed of flirting with me.'

'Mary, when you told me of his conduct after that woman went away——'

'Because he did not want me to tell you,' interrupted Mary. 'Great heavens, Violet, did you think I meant he made love to me?'

'Yes. What else could I think?'

'What else? I must speak—even if you are angry, I must. I was furious on your account. I thought you cared for him. There, it is all said now! I thought you cared, and it made me so happy—and to find him dishonourable! Oh, Violet, Violet—mayn't all the rest be some dreadful mistake too?'

Violet pressed her hands hard against her throbbing temples, and stared at her cousin. She could not credit her own ears. The girl must be trying to screen her secret at any cost, whether of truth or care for her listener's delicacy and pride.

'Before you went downstairs that night when we were talking here, you were unhappy. You had seen him during the day. You cannot deny that you were unhappy——'

'I was, but not about him,' Mary desper-

ately broke in upon the hesitating sentences. 'What did you mean when you wondered I couldn't have cared for the good man who—who—loved me? Nobody has made love to me, Violet.'

'But you knew Gilbert Warner loved you—you must have known that!' cried Violet, still in the depths of bewilderment.

'He never told me so,' faltered Mary, turning away her head.

'But he told me!'

Mary shrank a little farther off and put up one hand. The movement was a revelation to Violet. She sprang to her feet and seized her cousin's shoulder.

'What have I done!' she cried. 'He thought you cared for Aylmer. He talked with me, and—and I——'

'You told him I did!' groaned Mary. 'Oh, you might have ruined my whole life! No, no, I did not mean that! Oh, Violet, Violet!' and she flung her arms about her cousin, so overpowered between joy at this fresh confirmation of her own happiness and sympathy for Violet that she burst into tears and sobbed uncontrollably for a few moments, which was probably the best thing she could have done on both their accounts.

'He loves you! He loves you!' repeated Violet, straining her close to her heart. 'Oh, at least you will be happy; I thank God for it, my darling—heartily. Oh, the thought of your suffering was more than I could bear!'

'How could you be so blind—but never mind me!' returned Mary, wiping away her tears. 'Sit down, Violet,' and she forced her cousin gently back into her chair, resuming her own place on the footstool. 'Don't let us judge Mr. Aylmer! Oh! the more I reflected, the more certain I felt that he was not to blame. I don't try to put it all on her just because she is a woman—but she is such a dreadful creature! I have so often seen him avoid her. Oh, I behaved like a fool that night! And he couldn't have told—he is a man—he couldn't betray her! But I believe him when he said he loved you. Yes—I do! The professor knew it; he thought—oh, you won't be vexed?'

Violet only answered by a pressure of her hand.

'He thought you were unwilling to let yourself care about anybody—but that it would all end well—and oh, he is so fond of Aylmer; and he is a man, and must know

him as we cannot! Violet, I tell you that woman did the whole! Maybe she saw me, and thought at least she could ruin him in your esteem!'

Violet rose again, and began to pace the room in terrible agitation, while her cousin hurried on with every argument she could think of in Laurence's favour.

'I'll tell you what she did to-night. Of course the story is safe with you,' Violet said at length, and she related the exposure which had befallen the duchess at the card-table.

'Isn't a woman like that capable of anything?' shuddered Mary. 'Oh, Violet, don't let us believe anything against Mr. Aylmer on her account—at least give him an opportunity to explain. No, perhaps he could not—but believe him! I shall,' she added, careful in her delicacy not to put her pleadings in a fashion which could render her sympathy troublesome. 'See, one does not renounce a friend without good reason! We have always found him honourable and true; we are bound to credit his word. Why, what is friendship worth that cannot stand any and every test!'

'His very words,' answered Violet, pausing in her march. 'Oh, Mary, if I have wronged

him, I think he never can forgive me! I was so hard—I must have said horrible things to him.'

'One pardons everything to a friend—to the person one loves.' amended Mary. 'Yes, I may speak out. I don't pretend to know anything about your feelings, but I am certain he loves you! Oh, if I had not been such an idiot, you need have heard nothing — at least I could have waited to be sure!'

'I was ready for a moment to exonerate him, after what happened about her cheating at cards,' said Violet. 'Then I remembered——'

'That you thought him treacherous to me. I understand. My dearest dear, he liked to talk to me because I talked about you! Oh, Violet, it would be wicked to condemn him unheard! I shall tell the professor what happened: you can't stop me, I warn you! Mr. Aylmer shall have every chance possible —and I for one will believe his word! Oh, the more I have thought, the more I felt sure I was wrong! He didn't stir—it was she put her head—oh, I can't go over it!'

'No, no!' cried Violet, beginning to pace the room again.

'I was quite beside myself anyway, that night,' pursued Mary. 'I—I——'

'Ah, you were wondering why poor Gilbert had gone,' interrupted Violet, hurrying up to her, and embracing her again. 'That was my fault too, blind simpleton! Well, that is all clear enough now! Be happy—he loves you—he told me so—do you hear?'

'I don't want to hear till he is sensible enough to come and tell me himself,' said Mary, with a laugh and a sob. 'I am not thinking of myself! Oh, Violet, try to believe in poor Laurence!'

'My dear,' said Violet, with more composure, 'I shall not lose my friend if I can help it. Since I wronged him in one respect, I may easily have done so in another. The only question is, if I have, whether he can pardon me.'

'When he loves you!'

'Hush! Laurence Aylmer was my friend, and he would never have been more,' said Violet.

'Oh, he is the only man I ever saw that seemed worthy of you!' cried Mary, impatiently. 'How could you help liking him!'

'To marry him would have been very different from that,' replied Violet. 'A woman

may have for friend a man six years younger than herself—not a husband! At my age——'

'Your age! When you look like a girl—anybody would give him five years more than you! In ordinary cases I don't say you are not right—but for *you!*'

'My dear, there is no question of marriage—if I may keep my friend I shall be glad! Go you to bed—good-night!' and with a kiss upon Mary's cheek she went quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN DAWN BROKE.

The grey dawn broke over Florence—deepened and broadened—smote the casements of Laurence Aylmer's chamber, and roused him from sleep.

He had passed the greater portion of the night writing such letters as would be necessary in case he never returned from that expedition upon which he was to go forth in the early morning; then he lay down and speedily fell into a deep slumber, some pleasant memory of Violet brightening his dreams.

The premonition, so strong it became a certainty in his mind, that the encounter would end fatally for him, remained unshaken; it had been his last conscious reflection before he slept—it was his first thought when he

woke—solemn, awe-inspiring, but free from fear.

He rose in obedience to the summons which the light brought as it quivered like some spirit-touch across his eyelids, remembering that it was the last time it would ever arouse his soul while clothed in those habiliments of clay. He performed his toilet slowly, leisurely—he had never in his life felt more calm. Even his agonised heart had ceased its struggles against the cruelty of fate; the time for such weakness had passed; it belonged to men who still had a part in this world and this world's miseries—he had done with them.

As he finished dressing, some one knocked at the door. He knew who it was—the man that took charge of his apartment, bringing the coffee he had ordered for this hour.

'Come in, Giacomo,' he said, and the old servant entered with profuse Italian greetings, which not only comprehended wishes that his padrone's sleep had been pleasant, but that all the other nights of his life should bring rest as sweet, and this day and all coming days—and might they be many—filled with the choicest blessings that ever descended upon mortal.

Often as he had heard the same utterances,

they struck Aylmer oddly now. He smiled, spoke pleasantly to the old man, who was quite devoted to him, not more from the numerous acts of kindness he had received than from submission to the powerful sovereignty which youth and handsome looks possess over most minds.

'The signore starts early on his expedition,' Giacomo said, as he placed the tray upon the table.

'Rather early,' Aylmer answered, and again he smiled.

When the old man had gone, he drank his coffee, and looked about to see that he had forgotten nothing. He took the letters he had written and laid them in his desk where they would easily be found when wanted. He stood for a moment looking at the envelope which bore Violet Cameron's name.

'She will believe me when she reads this,' he thought. 'Men do not lie with death staring them in the face. She will believe me—ah, if only she never learns why I fought this man! I think she never will. Sabakine promised for himself and Gherardi; the Greek cannot remain here, so there is little danger.'

He laid the letter beside the others, and

closed the desk. The clock struck—the hour for his rendezvous with Sabakine had arrived, it having been decided that it would be better for the latter not to come in search of him.

He took up his hat and walked to the door —paused to take one parting glance about the familiar room. Then he drew a photograph from his breast-pocket, and stood gazing at it with his whole soul in his eyes, till a sudden rush of memories momentarily shook his composure, and he cried aloud in anguish—'Violet, Violet!'

In that portion of the gloomy old palace which she had chosen for her private apartments, Giulia da Rimini was already astir, arraying herself hurriedly—pale and stern enough to have represented Nemesis, save for the lurid gleam in her eyes and the triumphant smile on her mouth, which deprived the face of the passionless calm it should have worn to suit the comparison.

Exposed—ruined—forced to go forth from Florence, where life suited her so well; the duchess was furious at this necessity, not overcome by shame. And the entire catastrophe had been caused by Violet Cameron: she

brought the old man—she set him to watch.

Oh, amid all her disappointments—her cruel misfortunes for which, during the long hours of the night, the duchess had so often cursed the saints whom perhaps a moment before she had begged to help her—at least one consolation awaited her—revenge—revenge upon that haughty, insolent woman.

Laurence Aylmer was to die this morning; had Fate appeared in person to announce his doom, it could not be more certain. If Dimetri essayed the foul, underhand thrust, failure was impossible; and he had sworn not to spare—he would keep his oath. Ay, she could trust him—he would have sacrificed a hecatomb of human creatures in his cruel remorselessness to win his guerdon! Oh, if the wretch who had scorned her were only possessed of a score of lives, that she might have them all!

Revenge—revenge! She was ahungered and athirst for the sight of blood. She meant to witness the duel; Dimetri had no idea of her intention, but see it she would; her vengeance would be deprived of half its savour if she could not watch her enemy's last gasp.

After that, she would by some means force her way into Violet Cameron's presence, be the one to tell her that Aylmer was dead—dead for her whom he had loved. Since the knowledge could increase her misery, the creature should learn the full might of his devotion, extending even unto death—to death—the very repetition of the word was music!

Easy enough for the duchess to carry out her plan without fear; no one would come to her rooms until she rang—for that matter, she was past caring even if her absence were discovered—and indeed her personal attendants had been too long in her service to indulge surprise at any vagary on the part of their mistress. Her apartments communicated with a private staircase which led directly down into the neglected stretch of shrubberies, more like a wood than a garden, having a door that gave on a narrow street at the back of the palace, and the keys were always in her own possession.

To see the man die—watch his blood flow—gloat from her place of concealment over his latest groans—that was what she wanted.

I know how exaggerated this description sounds; but there are no words, however wild,

which would be strong enough to picture the state of her mind—her demoniac hatred of Violet Cameron — her murderous wrath against the man who had disdained her charms after months of crafty patience and unwearied pursuit on her part.

Ah, the world was not wide enough for him and her, so he must die—die! She uttered the word aloud with the ferocity wherewith very possibly one of her own ancestresses had cried it out when the fallen gladiator lay stretched on the arena sands, and his victor waited to hear the verdict, and the voices of vestals and noble matrons checked with fierce imprecations the sign which some emperor seized with sudden pity would have made.

And amid the luxurious gloom of her chamber, Violet Cameron slept on after the break of day—after the man going forth to death for her sake, and the woman eager for his murder, were both astir.

On leaving Mary she had sat down in her own room and lost herself in dreary meditation; then some recollection of the girl warned her that at least she could aid where the future of two human beings was concerned, whatever befell her and the man who had

given her his love—the man she had so deeply wronged.

She wrote a long letter to Gilbert Warner—careful to give no hint which could compromise Mary—only telling him that she had discovered his and her own mistake, advising him frankly if his happiness were so vitally concerned as he had told her, to postpone his departure for Greece until he had taken time to return to Florence and learn his fate from Mary's own lips.

'He will understand,' she thought; 'he will come back at once—ah, they shall be happy!'

She enclosed the letter to the professor, requesting him to forward it without delay, as she did not know Mr. Warner's address, and placed the missive where Clarice would find it when she entered in the morning.

She went to bed then, and at length fell asleep. She dreamed that she was wandering through a beautiful garden with Laurence Aylmer. Every cloud had been swept aside—he knew that she loved him—no doubt or scruple left in her own mind—and this haunt where they roved as far removed from the common world as if some enchanted sphere had opened to admit them and their happiness.

He left her side to pluck a flower she asked for—he did not return. She looked about—he had disappeared. By the tree where he had been standing she saw a serpent coiled upright, and as she stared in fascinated horror, she perceived that the monster wore a woman's face—Giulia da Rimini's—and was regarding her with that wicked smile she knew so well.

She tried to fly, but could not—to call Aylmer's name, but her lips refused to utter a sound. The serpent glided upright down the flowery paths, still looking back at her with Giulia's smile, and she was forced to follow its lead.

The way no longer led through a garden, but a dark morass filled with slimy water, where hideous creeping things clogged her feet, and human skulls grinned at her, and ghost-like figures circled about in a spectral dance; and she had to go on—on—in the serpent's wake—till suddenly she heard a rush and whiz, and through the din, Aylmer's voice calling her name in desperate agony:

'Violet, Violet!'

She woke—the vision so real that she could still hear those accents of mortal anguish.

Whether by some strange chance, whether

in obedience to some mysterious power held by our souls, I do not pretend to judge, but at the instant she woke, Laurence Aylmer, ready to leave his rooms, paused to look once more at her portrait, and as he regarded it a sudden spasm of despair at the thought that perhaps neither here nor hereafter throughout the sweep of eternity should he ever look upon her face again, wrung from his lips a cry of which the tones that roused her from sleep were like an echo :

'Violet, Violet !'

She sprang out of bed before she knew what she was doing, crossed the room to Mary's door, in the blind, instinctive search for human companionship in her terrible fear. Then she got her senses back—retraced her steps—reached the bed—lay down—for a little so faint and weak that she could not stir.

Gradually her strength returned. She tried to argue with herself. It was perfectly useless. She could not compose her mind. Could not lie there alone—she was afraid.

She rose again, opened the shutters, and let the day stream into the chamber. She seated herself, holding her head between her hands. That voice echoed in her ears still ; when she shut her eyes, she beheld anew the

hideous shape which had haunted her dream—the serpent wearing Giulia's smile.

She should certainly go mad if she did not get away from that close room—out into the free air. She sought hastily for garments to put on—so blind with pain that she groped about like a person trying to find his way through a heavy mist. Her fingers seemed turned to lead, and refused to do her bidding. Every movement she made caused a noise she fancied which might waken Mary, and now she shrank from companionship, ardently as she had longed for it a few moments since.

Oh, she should never be ready—she almost thought she had wasted hours in the task—and each moment was precious. She must go—go—something was awaiting her—some duty to be performed—what—where? She knew not—but she must go!

She was dressed at length—had found a hat and cloak—stared at herself in the mirror, fretted by a dreadful idea that she was crazy, that if she were not very cautious some disorder in attire or manner would attract attention from the people she might meet, and she be seized, held fast, hindered from achieving her task—what task? Oh, this fancy was more insane than all the rest, but she could not

subdue it—she must go forth and learn what errand fate had for her to do.

As she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, a certain composure came over her : she could reflect—argue. She had been in a frenzy, but it had passed—only the effect of her terrible dream. At least she would keep on her way—the air would do her good. She should find Antonio stirring somewhere—he was always the first up in the house.

She met him on the stairs : he stared in wonder at her appearance at such an hour—alarmed too by her pallor.

'Antonio,' she said, 'I am nearly frantic with nervous headache—I must go out.'

'Into the garden, mademoiselle ?'

'No, no—it is too close ! Come with me —can we find a carriage ? I will drive to the Cascine, and walk there.'

She had no thought of giving the direction till she heard the words on her lips. This utterance without conscious volition brought back that awful dread—some duty awaited her. Oh, she was mad, mad !

Antonio only bowed in response, and followed her down to the entrance-hall. The sleepy porter, in his shirt-sleeves, was just

opening the outer doors: he caught sight of his mistress, and fled in search of a jacket, too much occupied with the fact of having been surprised by his lady in a garb so unorthodox even to marvel what could have roused her at this unholy hour. But Antonio, always prudent, would leave no loophole for astonishment or possible gossip.

'The signora has a headache,' he said softly, as the porter returned and began fumbling at the locks. 'The doctor orders early walks when she suffers so—she is going out.'

The doors swing back—Violet drew her veil over her face, and passed into the street. The cabs were just taking their station on the stand at the corner: Antonio helped her into a covered hack, mounted the box, and they drove away.

The guardian seated at the carriage entrance of the Cascine had already seen two vehicles go by. Had the early hour roused any suspicion in his mind that it was his duty to inquire into the matter, or give information to the mounted patrol when those officials should make their tardy appearance, the doubt would have been dispelled by the fact that in this carriage, as well as the second of

the former ones, a lady sat. The guardian might have his own ideas that a fancy for such early driving on the part of two gentlemen and a brace of ladies was, to say the least, a singular coincidence, but of course no business of his.

To avoid all possibility of attracting undue attention from this personage, it had been arranged that Sabakine and Aylmer, carrying the necessary weapons with them, should enter the Cascine by this route, while Gherardi and his principal, accompanied by the surgeon, made their way into the wood across the suspension bridge higher up, and beyond the view of the guard at the gates.

When the cab reached the open space where the great *café* stands, Violet could no longer bear the restraint of inaction. She pulled down the glass and ordered the coachman to stop.

'Wait for me here,' she said to Antonio, as he assisted her to alight; 'I will walk through the meadow. I shall not meet a creature so early as this.'

Again Antonio bowed in acquiescence. He saw that she was suffering terribly from some cause. It might be physical, as she had declared, though of that the shrewd Swiss

had his doubts, and out of the profundity of his unerring tact forbore to annoy her even by the sound of his voice.

Violet crossed the square, and entered the pretty green field which stretches for a considerable distance along the middle of the Cascine. To the right, the shining sweep of blue hills was visible above the trees; at the left spread a wide, dense thicket, beyond which wound the road and the river, whereof she caught occasional glimpses as she passed paths cut through the dense shrubberies.

She hurried on, consumed by the same wild impatience—the feeling that something called her, that she must attain some goal: each moment more important than hours, days of ordinary life—delay fraught with peril, though to whom she knew not—and utterly unable to combat the sensation by any argument.

She reached the end of the meadow, and gained a narrow alley so shut in among the trees and bushes that she seemed in the heart of a great forest. It was gloomy and dark here. Not a sound broke the stillness, not even the singing of an early bird. The hush became oppressive. She would make her way through the thicket, and come out on

the bank of the Arno; at least she should have broad daylight there, and the voice of the water to break this terrible silence.

She turned aside into the bosquet, too impatient to wait till she arrived at one of the paths which crossed it. The bushes and long vines trailing down from the trees caught at her dress, reminding her of the horror of her dream. The ground grew damp and sodden, like the morass she had journeyed over in that fearful vision. Once a tiny snake started up just at her feet, and glided away with a sharp hiss into its covert.

The horror of her nightmare came back with such force that she groaned aloud, for an instant frightened by her own voice, thinking it another's. She plunged recklessly on. The brambles tore her hands and her garments. They seemed trying to hold her back. With every step the likeness to her journey in her dream grew stronger. Oh, if it lasted only a few minutes longer she should go wholly mad!

She was coming out. She caught glimpses of a little cleared space through the branches. At the same moment a sound struck her ear. O God, what was it? The click of steel striking against steel!

She halted. It must be a delusion. She was mad—mad! Some living creature was near. She heard a quick, gasping breath. Before she could turn her head, she felt two arms close round her like an iron band. Then a hand forced both her hands behind her back, furious fingers clutched at her throat, dragged her head upward. Giulia da Rimini's eyes were blazing into hers, that awful smile —oh, the exact smile the serpent had worn! —parting her bloodless lips.

For a few seconds Violet struggled wildly in her captor's hold, almost suffocated by the pressure upon her throat.

'Do you mean to murder me?' she gasped in a hoarse whisper, articulating with great difficulty even in that strangled tone.

The duchess stooped to bring her mouth close to Violet's ear, and hissed slowly out— oh, the very hiss of the serpent in her dream!—

'Better than that. I mean you to see him killed! Do you hear?—to see him killed!'

Completely unnerved before in mind and body, Violet grew so sick and faint that she was utterly powerless in the woman's hold. At no time would she have been a match for

her tormentor, but now she could not even struggle in that boa-like grasp; and the relentless fingers clutched still tighter at her throat, rendering speech impossible.

The woman dragged her on a few paces, pushed her head forward, and hissed again:

'Look! look!'

Through a red haze Violet saw two men standing at the farther end of the cleared space, a sword in the hand of each—flashing, waving, thrusting, like tongues of flame before her eyes, the click and ring of the metal smiting her ears like a bell. She beheld the faces of the pair; she was watching Laurence Aylmer and the Greek in their deadly contest.

She could not have cried out now even if the pressure on her throat had relaxed sufficiently to permit; her head sank back against the woman's shoulder; again she felt that burning breath fan her cheek; again she heard that dreadful voice—oh, always the serpent's hiss, though endowed with human speech!—

'He loved you; you shall see him die! Wait, only a little; it will come. Dimetri has a secret that never fails! This is my revenge; he dies, you must live; and you love him—you love him!'

The purgatorial agony of her soul roused a spasm of physical vitality in Violet; she fought fiercely to free herself, to cry out—in vain. She was helpless as if the present torture of body and mind had been a part of that terrible dream.

Always the flash of the swords blinding her eyes; their scrape and rattle cutting her ears, and the duchess's voice muttering maledictions to that accompaniment.

'Accursed! I know what will hurt you most!' the woman chanted, staring eagerly out at the combat while she spoke. 'He loved you! he told me so—do you hear, devil? he loved you! I'd let another woman think he loved me, but the truth will hurt you most: he loved you, he loved you!'

Clash—scrape—rattle: the lightning-like thrusts given and parried before her eyes, and that voice in her ear.

'I tried to win him; no use! I got to hate him; then he told me of his love for you—you; that was his death-warrant! You hear, you see, you suffer, and I am glad—glad! Ah, at last; no, not yet! Oh, Dimetri, quick, quick! I am tired of waiting!'

And, as if in obedience to her whispered words, the Greek stepped back; Aylmer ad-

vanced a pace, parried a feigned thrust, and on the instant his antagonist's blade entered his chest, high up to the right.

Aylmer wavered back and forth thrice, tottered slowly forward, and remained motionless for the briefest possible space of a second. Then rapidly body and limbs huddled together, and he lay in a heap on the ground, his left arm falling slightly outward, so that his head rested upon it, his face turned towards Violet as she stood.

'Dead!' she heard a voice exclaim; it was Sabakine's.

'Dead!' the duchess echoed in her ear. 'You killed him, remember! He fought on your account; he died believing you Carlo's mistress! I have my revenge every way; he is dead, and you are his murderess!'

She released her hold with such suddenness that Violet fell backward, and rushed away through the wood. In another instant, almost as soon as Sabakine and the surgeon could reach the prostrate form, they were startled by a rush like the wings of a great bird, and Violet Cameron swept between them, sank upon the earth, and lifted Aylmer's head to her knees, muttering: 'He is dead, and I killed him!'

Not a word was spoken by the by-standers; Sabakine made a warning sign to the surgeon, then knelt behind Violet, and put his arm about her waist to support her as she crouched holding that ghastly head.

Even in his haste, the Greek, while putting on coat and hat, could not resist glancing at Violet's face; its rigid horror struck a chill even through his veins. He whispered a few syllables to Gherardi, who replied by a nod, and hurried off in accordance with the programme laid down in advance for the survivor, because seconds as well as principals had understood when they set out upon their morning's work, that both men would not leave the place alive.

The surgeon opened the shirt, through which a small stream of blood oozed, staining Violet's hands and garments as it fell. He performed his task in silence, waited a little, then said: 'He breathes still.'

Nobody answered.

Sabakine drew a dog-whistle from his pocket, and handed it to Gherardi, motioning him to blow it; he obeyed, and, in answer to the shrill summons, Sabakine's carriage drove up; two Russian servants whom he could trust seated upon the box.

Only when they were lifting the body did Violet speak.

'To my house,' she said; 'to my house.'

Sabakine was about to attempt some expostulation; she raised herself and turned towards him; the words died on his lips when he looked in her face. She followed as the men carried their burthen to the carriage.

'Let me go with him; I will go!' she said.

They helped her in; the surgeon got in too. They laid the body down as best they could. Once more Laurence's head rested on Violet's shoulder as it had done during that first drive, when he had dared death for her sake. Even in this moment the recollection shot through her mind. Ah, this journey would have a different ending—the grave was its goal.

'The swords!' whispered Gherardi.

Sabakine picked them up, and hid them under a seat of the carriage. The vehicle drove off; for a few seconds the two men left behind stood staring at each other with horrified eyes, then silently began the work which remained: covered the blood with sand—carefully removed every trace of footsteps—scattered twigs and leaves about—then hurried away, silent still.

As they passed through the meadow, they

met Antonio, who, disquieted by his mistress's long absence, had sent the carriage up the road, and come in search of her.

'Miss Cameron has gone home in my carriage,' Sabakine explained. 'There has been an accident. Mr. Aylmer is hurt. Not a word to anybody at present—you know how to hold your tongue. Where is the hack?'

Antonio pointed to the road.

'I saw the Duchess da Rimini and the Greek drive off together,' was all he said.

'My God!' the two men muttered simultaneously.

Once the surgeon saw Violet's lips move; he thought she was trying to ask some question, and bent his head to listen, but she was only whispering:

'He is dead! and I killed him!'

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER ALL.

For three days Laurence Aylmer lay speechless, almost motionless, on his bed in the very room where so few months previous he had fought his way back to life: now, as then, Violet Cameron told herself over and over, brought face to face with death through her agency.

No matter that, nearly frantic as she was, reason refused to admit the possibility of considering her share in either catastrophe other than her misfortune; the fact remained that she had been the cause of both.

This time there was no hope; even when the professor himself told her that life still lingered, that perhaps for several days no human power could predict as to the final results, her faculties stayed shut against the

contemplation of any possible chance as completely as in that first moment of horror when she knelt by what she believed his dead body.

No one — not Miss Bronson herself — dreamed of questioning or expostulating, whatever Violet might do. Everybody about, beginning with the professor, obeyed her slightest wish unhesitatingly. He had warned the household that he could not answer for the consequences if she were thwarted in any way.

She looked like a dead woman, save for the maddened misery of her eyes, where life showed its strength in the unutterable agony they revealed. She scarcely left the bedside either day or night. Whenever she moved, Aylmer's glance would follow her, while across the haze that dulled it crept an expression of trouble; and though deaf to every other sound, her voice never failed to reach his ear: beyond this, for hours and hours, he evinced scarcely any sign of vitality, save in the laboured, irregular breathing—even that grew so faint sometimes they had to listen attentively to catch it.

The professor explained that the wound had occasioned pneumonia—of course much more perilous than if the inflammation of the lung

had been produced by the ordinary cause, a cold or sudden chill.

He said this, and he said no more; but the other physician deemed it his duty to reply frankly to Violet's questions: he could hold out no hope—humanly speaking, there was none. The professor did not chide his colleague, and this tacit concurrence in his verdict crushed the little group of attendant friends so utterly that they were powerless to try by word or look to comfort or encourage Violet.

Carlo and Nina were there; Sabakine scarcely quitted the house, though there was little for anybody to do except watch —watch — count the hours, remembering that each brought the end nearer. Sometimes there was one duty to perform; when the sufferer's pillows had to be raised a little and supported by some person seated on the bed. Violet was obliged to relinquish this task to the others. Aylmer lay always with his eyes fastened on her face; usually they betrayed no sign of recognition, but if she stirred they wandered in troubled search of her presence.

On the afternoon of the third day, Carlo and Sabakine went to Aylmer's lodgings to

pack up and bring away his possessions ; it would be easier now than later when—when it was all over.

They knew that the wildest rumours were afloat in Florence, but the facts concerning the duel were not known. It was declared by many that Giulia da Rimini had tried to murder Aylmer—that he had shot himself in despair caused by losses at cards and his failure to secure Miss Cameron's fortune—that the Greek had assassinated him and eloped with the duchess. Of course each tale was contradicted in turn, and some new one invented to take its place.

Fortunately for Madame da Rimini, it became certain that the duke was very ill in Paris, so the letter she had written to several friends before her departure, announcing that she had been called to his bedside, received a share of credence ; though that something very dreadful had happened at Lady Harcourt's house was already established, and so many tales in regard to borrowed moneys, defrauded tradesmen, and the like, speedily followed, that the duchess's ostracism was almost as complete as if the truth had been openly declared.

While Sabakine and the marchese were

performing their mournful duty with the aid of poor old Giacomo, they opened a writing-desk to lay in some papers, and found the letters Aylmer had written on the night before the duel. Among these epistles was one for the professor, and another which bore Miss Cameron's name.

There was no opportunity to place these letters in the professor's hands until evening. A change had taken place in Aylmer's condition—he was conscious—able to speak a little. The doctors said that by the next day he would be perfectly clear in his mind—able, indeed, to answer questions concerning his affairs, and transact any business, such as the making of a will, which might seem necessary. Sabakine had demanded if this would be the case, as he knew from his last conversation with Aylmer that he regretted not having leisure to alter the testament which he had had executed before leaving America.

During the night, while Aylmer slept and Violet sat by his side, the professor, who shared her vigil, read the letter addressed to himself, and at length, after a good deal of reflection, he handed Violet hers, telling her in a few words where it had been found.

'It was better to give it to you now, my

dear,' he said, laying his hand softly on her head as he might have caressed a child, while his rugged features worked with emotion. 'He may make some allusion to its contents, whatever they are, and it would fret him if you failed to understand. I will sit by the bed while you read it. You need not be afraid —he is sound asleep, and will not wake for some time yet.'

Violet moved to the other end of the room, and sat down close to the shaded lamp which cast a faint glow through the chamber. She opened the letter: it was like reading a message from the dead. Once she glanced at the face upon the pillows—its death-like stillness only increased the feeling.

'You will believe me when you read this —in thought, word and deed I have been true. I loved you from the first moment of our meeting: I shall go into eternity with that love in my soul, eternal as the soul itself.'

'Never grieve for me! If you love me, I shall know it. Think of me as near you always. My darling, my one love, farewell!'

Presently, looking across the dimness of the chamber, the professor saw Violet sink slowly upon her knees: he bowed his head reverently and turned his eyes away.

Perhaps half an hour afterwards, Violet was roused from her wordless prayer by the professor's whispering :

'He is waking, my child.'

She started up and hastened towards the bed. Aylmer opened his eyes, looked eagerly about, and cried :

'Violet, Violet !'

'I am here,' she answered ; Laurence, I am here.'

The professor rose and placed her gently in the chair, saying in her ear :

'Soothe him—quiet him—whatever he asks or says. He will be perfectly clear in his mind now.'

Then he stole softly away into the adjoining room, and left the pair together.

'Violet, Violet !' Aylmer repeated.

'Yes, Laurence,' she said steadily.

He opened his eyes and looked at her with a beautiful smile.

'I knew you were here,' he murmured ; 'even when I seemed quite unconscious, I always knew it.'

'Yes, Laurence,' she said again.

'My head is quite clear now,' he continued ; 'oh, I wanted so much to tell you awhile ago, but I could not. I thought I should

have to go out of the world without even being able to speak your name again—Violet, my Violet! Ah, I know you must understand—you must believe me now! I wrote—I remember writing—they will give you my letter later.'

'I have read it,' she said. 'Do you hear—can you listen?'

He put out his hand feebly; she bent her forehead upon it as it rested on the edge of the bed.

'I love you,' she said, in a slow, clear voice; 'I have loved you all the time—can you believe me?'

He gazed up into her face with eyes fairly superhuman in their tenderness.

'Say it once more,' he whispered.

'I love you, Laurence—I love you!'

He drew a long, deep breath, and his head, which he had partially lifted, sank back on the pillow—his eyes closed.

'Kiss me,' he murmured.

She pressed her lips on his in a long, fervent caress. Then there was silence between them for a few moments; when she saw that he was looking at her again, that transcendent peace and happiness glorifying his eyes still, she said softly:

'I only thought of you, Laurence—try to believe that. I was older than you—I feared to yield to the dictates of my heart—afraid it would be a wrong to you! That was the only reason why I hesitated. For myself, I should have been prouder to hear you call me wife than to have been crowned queen of the whole world!'

'Is it too late?' he asked. 'Ah, yes—too late for this world—and yet—and yet! Oh, my darling, if you could!'

He stretched out his hands feebly—clasped them about her neck, and her cheek rested on his bosom.

'Is it wrong to ask it?' he questioned. 'Would it make it all harder for you? Ah, love, I could go away not venturing to murmur, if only I might call you my wife once here. I could wait for you then—I could be patient.'

'Ask me anything,' she answered, in a voice that was like a strain of heavenly music, so free from agitation did it sound. In this moment her soul was lifted too far above earth for any human weakness to disturb it. 'Ask me anything—I will not refuse.'

He uttered a low inarticulate cry, so full of joy that it sounded like the utterance of some seraphic tongue already grown his own.

'My wife,' he said presently; 'you will be my wife?'

'I thank you for the wish,' she murmured; 'your wife, Laurence—your wife!'

And again their lips met—again that eloquent silence followed. Then she said suddenly: 'You have forgiven——'

'Hush!' he interrupted; 'between you and me, love, there could be nothing to forgive.'

A wave from the sea of her mortal trouble which had been for a moment swept back, cast its bitter stretch across her soul.

'Oh, my heart, that I could doubt you!' she moaned.

'Under all you never did!' he answered. 'Forget that—it was only a painful dream—we are awake now! Oh, my darling, happiness has nothing to do with time! Give me heaven here on my death-bed—my wife—my wife!'

'Your wife!' she echoed.

'To-morrow? Oh, remember, every hour is precious!'

'To-morrow,' she whispered; 'if the doctor consents—to-morrow.'

'Where is he?' Aylmer asked.

Violet called his name. The professor appeared at the summons, came up to the bed and stood over them.

'This is my wife,' Aylmer said, drawing Violet's head closer to his breast. 'You will not oppose a dying man—to-morrow, dear old friend?'

'To-morrow,' the professor responded, would have added other words, but his voice broke. He hurried back into the adjoining chamber, and cried like a child amid its solitude.

'This is worth years and years of ordinary life, love,' Aylmer said. 'Hold my hand—lay your dear face on the pillow — let me sleep now.'

He slept again. After a time the professor looked into the room; worn out with fatigue, Violet slept too, her head resting close to her lover's — even in slumber their faces turned towards one another.

The next day came. Aylmer's strength held out; his mind remained as clear as at the most healthful moment of his life.

When the little group of friends were collected that morning, waiting till the professor or Violet should appear to give them news of the past night, the door opened and Violet entered.

There was something so solemn, so holy in her face, that not one of those eager watchers

could speak. The same thought struck each simultaneously—she had come to tell them there was no Laurence Aylmer any longer in the world. But as she drew near, she paused and said calmly :

'We are to be married at noon—I came to tell you.'

The reaction in their minds was so sudden that nobody was able to answer. They kissed her one after another, and let her go away in silence. When the door closed, the three women began to weep softly. Sabakine sat with his face hidden in his hands—Carlo was sobbing without any effort to hide his tears.

Noon came. They gathered in the room where the wounded man lay : a temporary altar and odorous flowers made it like a chapel. Then the professor led Violet in : she was dressed in white from head to foot ; so pale, so composed, so beautiful, that she looked rather like a spirit sent to summon the sufferer than an earthly bride.

The ceremony was performed ; after a little they all stole out and left the husband and wife together.

'I can bear even the parting now,' Laurence whispered ; 'God has been so good to me that I dare not murmur.'

The day passed—evening drew on.

A change came over Aylmer; his temporary strength failed; a coldness and faintness like the chill of death seized his faculties. As long as he could articulate, words of comfort and tenderness kept Violet's soul anchored and still.

'Lift me up,' he called suddenly; 'wife, wife!'

The words died on his lips—his breathing grew fainter—his head drooped upon her bosom. Then a merciful insensibility seized Violet, and she knew no more.

When she woke to consciousness, she comprehended that her mind had for days and days been struggling amid the delirium of fever. Memory came abruptly back—she recollected everything.

'If his soul might only send me some sign!' she murmured, half aloud.

She heard his voice call in answer:

'Violet, Violet—my wife!'

She lifted her eyes, and saw him seated by her bed.

'Am I dead too?' she whispered.

Then she heard his voice again:

'Not death, but life, love. God has given us our heaven here.'

* * * * *

A gorgeous September morning lighted one of the most beautiful passes in the Apennines —brightened a picturesque villa, embowered in forest trees, and commanding a view for miles and miles of the valleys below—oh, lovely almost, one would think, as the blessed land that Moses's prophet-vision watched from the height of Pisgah!

The old chapel attached to the dwelling was gay with flowers; the little knot of friends whom I have so frequently described together were collected there; and, amid the beauty of the morning, Mary Danvers and Gilbert Warner were made husband and wife.

'Miss Bronson,' said the professor, as the carriage which held the young pair drove away, 'this day decides me. I am ready to become your legal victim whenever you choose.'

And the spinster was in a mood so joyous that, instead of resenting his irreverent jest, she laughed as heartily as the others.

'Carlo looks as if it was rather nice to be a victim,' said Sabakine.

The marchese only answered by drawing his little wife closer, as she stood with her hand upon his arm. These past weeks had brought such a world of new hopes and aims, that life

for both had drifted into a sunshine higher and purer than that which had lighted the old paths.

'Sabakine,' said Lady Harcourt, 'the sight of all this bliss is certain before long to tempt you into matrimony also! Really, I think nothing remains for an old fairy like me but to pronounce a general benediction, and disappear in an ivory chariot drawn by winged lions. I must wait though, for I see that Violet and her Laurence have already vanished.'

They talked merry nonsense for awhile; then Lady Harcourt, who had halted at the villa on her journey back from Paris, began giving the details of a tragic story which the friends had seen briefly chronicled in the journals of the day.

Giulia da Rimini, betrayed to her husband by Dimetri, had been publicly expelled from his house. The Greek had robbed her of her last resources in money and jewels, and she was forced to take refuge in some dismal lodgings kept by a former servant, who possessed humanity enough to grant her an asylum.

She was found dead in her room the morning after her arrival—a bottle of laudanum by

her side—the pathetic smile which in life sometimes softened her stern beauty still mantling her lips.

And while the visitors sat together, the husband and wife were wandering, arm-in-arm, along the garden paths.

'You are sure, sure?' Violet asked, looking up into Aylmer's face with eyes which answered her own question, for their radiant happiness proved that now and then heaven's choicest boon—perfect peace and rest—is granted to mortals on earth.

'My love—my own!' he whispered. 'Our souls have been away down to the gates of death together—here and hereafter they are one.'

THE END.

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